MASTERS of the WHEAT-LANDS

HAROLD BINDLOSS

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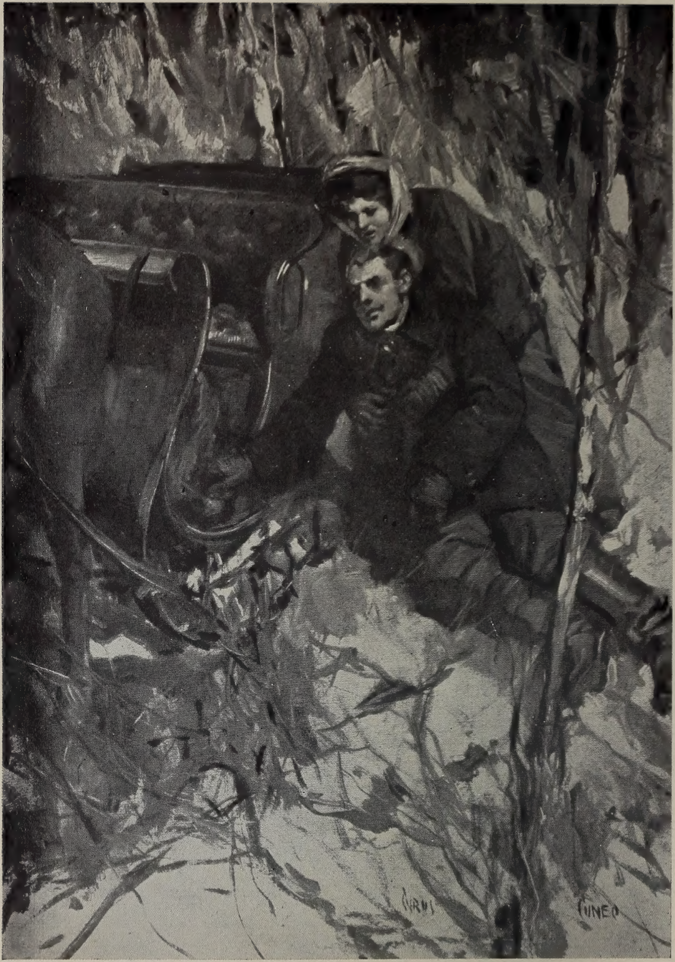
MASTERS OF THE WHEAT-LANDS



"IT'S GOING TO HURT, GREGORY, BUT I HAVE GOT TO GET YOU IN"
Page 17

MASTERS OF THE WHEAT-LANDS

BY

HAROLD BINDLOSS

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MASTERS OF THE WHEAT-LANDS

Masters of the Wheat-lands

CHAPTER I

SALLY CREIGHTON

THE frost outside was bitter, and the prairie which rolled back from Lander's in long undulations to the far horizon, gleamed white beneath the moon, but there was warmth and brightness in Stukely's wooden barn. The barn stood at one end of the little, desolate settlement, where the trail that came up from the railroad thirty miles away forked off into two wavy ribands melting into a waste of snow. Lander's consisted then of five or six frame houses and stores, a hotel of the same material, several sod stables, and a few birch-log barns; and its inhabitants considered it one of the most promising places in Western Canada. That, however, is the land of promise, a promise which is in due time usually fulfilled, and the men of Lander's were, for the most part, shrewdly practical optimists. They made the most of a somewhat grim and frugal present, and staked all they had to give—the few dollars they had brought in with them, and their powers of enduring toil—upon the roseate future.

Stukely had given them, and their scattered neighbors, who had driven there across several leagues of prairie, a supper in his barn. A big rusty stove, brought in for the occasion, stood in the center of the barn floor. Its pipe glowed in places a dull red, and now and then Stukely wondered uneasily whether it was charring a larger hole through the shingles of the roof. On one side of the stove the floor had been cleared; on the other, benches, empty barrels and tables were huddled together, and such of the guests as were not dancing at the moment, sat upon the various substitutes for chairs. A keg of hard Ontario cider had been provided for the refreshment of the guests, and it was open to anybody to ladle up what he wanted with a tin dipper. A haze of tobacco smoke drifted in thin blue wisps beneath the big nickeled lamps, and in addition to the reek of it, the place was filled with the smell of hot iron which an over-driven stove gives out, and the subtle odors of old skin coats.

The guests, however, were accustomed to an atmosphere of that kind, and it did not trouble them. For the most part, they were lean, spare, straight of limb and bronzed by frost and snow-blink, for though scarcely half of them were Canadian born, the prairie, as a rule, swiftly sets its stamp upon the newcomer. Also, there was something in the way they held themselves and put their feet down that suggested health and vigor, and, in the case of most of them, a certain alertness and decision of character. Some were from English cities, a few from those of Canada, and some from the bush of Ontario; but there was a similarity among them for which the cut and tightness of their store clothing did not altogether account. They lived well, though plainly, and toiled out in the open unusually hard. Their eyes were steady, their bronzed skin was clear, and their laughter had a wholesome ring.

A fiery-haired Scot, a Highlander, sat upon a barrel-head sawing at a fiddle, and the shrill scream of it filled the barn. To tone he did not aspire, but he played with Caledonian nerve and swing, and kept the snapping time. It was mad, harsh music of the kind that sets the blood tingling, causes the feet to move in rhythm, though the exhilarating effect of it was rather spoiled by the efforts of the little French Canadian who had another fiddle and struck clanging chords from the lower strings.

In the cleared space they were dancing what was presumably a quadrille, though it bore almost as great a resemblance to a Scottish country dance, or indeed to one of the measures of rural France, which was, however, characteristic of the present country.

The Englishman has set no distinguishable impress upon the prairie. It has absorbed him with his reserve and sturdy industry, and apparently the Canadian from the cities is also lost in it, too, for his is the leaven that works through the mass slowly and unobtrusively, while the Scot and the habitant of French extraction have given the life of it color and individuality. Extremes meet and fuse on the wide white levels of the West.

An Englishman, however, was the life of that dance, and he was physically a larger man than most of the rest, for, as a rule, the Colonial born run to wiry hardness rather than to solidity of frame. Gregory Hawtrey was tall and thick of shoulder, though the rest of him was in fine modeling, and he had a pleasant face of the English blue-eyed type. Just then it was shining with boyish merriment, and indeed an irresponsible gayety was a salient characteristic of the man. One would have called him handsome, though his mouth was a trifle slack, and though a certain assurance in his manner just fell short of swagger. He was the kind of man one likes at first sight, but for all that not the kind his hard-bitten neighbors would have chosen to stand by them through the strain of drought and frost in adverse seasons.

As it happened, the grim, hard-faced Sager, who had come there from Michigan, was just then talking about him to Stukely.

"Kind of tone about that man—guess he once had the gold-leaf on him quite thick, and it hasn't all worn off yet," said Sager. "Seen more Englishmen like him, and some folks from Noo York, too, when I took parties bass fishing way back yonder."

He waved his hand vaguely, as though to indicate the American Republic, and Stukely agreed with him. They were right as far as they went, for Hawtrey undoubtedly possessed a grace of manner which, however, somehow failed to reach distinction. It was, perhaps, just a little too apparent, and lacked the strengthening feature of restraint.

"I wonder," remarked Stukely reflectively, "what those kind of fellows done before they came out here."

He had expressed a curiosity which is now and then to be met with on the prairie, but Sager, the charitable, grinned.

"Oh," he responded, "I guess quite a few done no more than make their folks on the other side tired of them, and that's why they sent them out to you. Some of them get paid so much on condition that they don't come back again. Say"—and he glanced toward the dancers—"Dick Creighton's Sally seems quite stuck on Hawtrey by the way she's looking at him."

Stukely assented. He was a somewhat primitive person, as was Sally Creighton, for that matter, and he did not suppose that she would have been greatly offended had she overheard his observations.

"Well," he said, "I've thought that, too. If she wants him she'll get him. She's a smart girl—Sally."

There were not many women present—perhaps one to every two of the men, which was rather a large proportion in that country, and their garments were not at all costly or beautiful. The fabrics were, for the most part, the cheapest obtainable, and the wearers had fashioned their gowns with their own fingers, in the scanty interludes between washing, and baking, and mending their husbands' or fathers' clothes. The faces of the women were a trifle sallow and had lost their freshness in the dry heat of the stove. Their hands were hard and reddened, and in figure most of them were thin and spare. One could have fancied that in a land where everybody toiled strenuously their burden was heavier than the men's. One or two of the women clearly had been accustomed to a smoother life, but there was nothing to suggest that they looked back to it with regret. As a matter of fact, they looked forward, working for the future, and there was patient courage in their smiling eyes.

Creighton's Sally, who was then tripping through the measure on Hawtrey's arm, was native born. She was young and straight—straighter in outline than the women of the cities—with a suppleness which was less suggestive of the willow than a rather highly-tempered spring. She moved with a large vigor which barely fell short of grace, her eyes snapped when she smiled at Hawtrey, and her hair, which was of a ruddy brown, had fiery gleams in it. Anyone would have called her comely, and there were, indeed, no women in Stukely's barn to compare with her in that respect, a fact that she recognized.

"Oh, yes," said Sager reflectively; "she'll get him sure if she sets her mind on it, and there's no denying that they make a handsome pair. I've nothing against Hawtrey either: a straight man, a hustler, and smart at handling a team. Still, it's kind of curious that while the man's never been stuck for the stamps like the rest of us, he's made nothing very much of his homestead yet. Now there's Bob, and Jake, and Jasper came in after he did with half the money, and they thrash out four bushels of hard wheat for Hawtrey's three."

Stukely made a little gesture of concurrence, for he dimly realized the significance of his companion's speech.

It is results which count in that country, where the one thing demanded is practical efficiency, and the man of simple, steadfast purpose usually goes the farthest. Hawtrey had graces which won him friends, boldness of conception, and the power of application; but he had somehow failed to accomplish as much as his neighbors did. After all, there must be a good deal to be said for the man who raises four bushels of good wheat where his comrade with equal facilities raises three.

In the meanwhile Hawtrey was talking to Sally, and it was not astonishing that they talked of farming, which is the standard topic on that strip of prairie.

"So you're not going to break that new piece this spring?" she asked.

"No," answered Hawtrey; "I'd want another team, anyway, and I can't raise the money; it's hard to get out here."

"Plenty under the sod," declared Sally, who was essentially practical. "That's where we get ours, but you have to put the breaker in and turn it over. You"—and she flashed a quick glance at him—"got most of yours from England. Won't they send you any more?"

Hawtrey's eyes twinkled as he shook his head. "I'm afraid they won't," he replied. "You see, I've put the screw on them rather hard the last few years."

"How did you do that?" Sally inquired. "Told them you were thinking of coming home again?"

There was a certain wryness in the young man's smile, for though Hawtrey had cast no particular slur upon the family's credit he had signally failed to enhance it, and he was quite aware that his English relatives did not greatly desire his presence in the Old Country.

"My dear," he said, "you really shouldn't hit a fellow in the eye that way."

As it happened, he did not see the girl's face just then, or he might have noticed a momentary change in its expression. Gregory Hawtrey was a little casual in speech, but, so far, most of the young women upon whom he bestowed an epithet indicative of affection had attached no significance to it. They had wisely decided that he did not mean anything.

The Scottish fiddler's voice broke in.

"Can ye no' watch the music? Noo it's paddy-bash!" he cried.

His French Canadian comrade waved his fiddle-bow protestingly.

"Paddybashy! *V'la la belle chose!*" he exclaimed with ineffable contempt, and broke in upon the ranting melody with a succession of harsh, crashing chords.

Then began a contest as to which could drown the other's instrument, and the snapping time grew faster, until the dancers gasped, and men who wore long boots encouraged them with cries and stamped a staccato accompaniment upon the benches or on the floor. It was savage, rasping music, but one player infused into it the ebullient nerve of France, and the other was from the misty land where the fiddler learns the witchery of the clanging reel and the swing of the Strathspey. It is doubtless not high art, but there is probably no music in the world that fires the blood like this and turns the sober dance to rhythmic riot. Perhaps, too, amid the prairie snow, it gains something that gives it a closer compelling grip.

Hawtrey was breathless when it ceased, and Sally's eyes flashed with the effulgence of the Northern night when her partner found her a resting-place upon an upturned barrel.

"No," she declared, "I won't have any cider." She turned and glanced at him imperiously. "You're not going for any more either."

It was, no doubt, not the speech a well-trained English maiden would have made, but, though Hawtrey smiled rather curiously, it fell inoffensively from Sally's lips. Though it is not always set down to their credit, the brown-faced, hard-handed men as a rule live very abstemiously in that country, and, as it happened, Hawtrey, who certainly showed no sign of it, had already consumed rather more cider than anybody else. He made a little bow of submission, and Sally resumed their conversation where it had broken off.

"We could let you have our ox-team to do that breaking with," she volunteered. "You've had Sproatly living with you all winter. Why don't you make him stay and work out his keep?"

Hawtrey laughed. "Sally," he said, "do you think anybody could make Sproatly work?"

"It would be hard," the girl admitted, and then looked up at him with a little glint in her eyes. "Still, I'd put a move on him if you sent him along to me."

She was a capable young woman, but Hawtrey was dubious concerning her ability to accomplish such a task. Sproatly was an Englishman of good education, though his appearance seldom suggested it. Most of the summer he drove about the prairie in a wagon, vending cheap oleographs and patent medicines, and during the winter contrived to obtain free quarters from his bachelor acquaintances. It is a hospitable country, but there were men round Lander's who, when they went away to work in far-off lumber camps, as they sometimes did, nailed up their doors and windows to prevent Sproatly from getting in.

"Does he never do anything?" Sally added.

"No," Hawtrey assured her, "at least, never when he can help it. He had, however, started something shortly before I left him. You see, the house has needed cleaning, the last month or two, and we tossed up for who should do it. It fell to Sproatly, who didn't seem quite pleased, but he got as far as firing the chairs and tables out into the snow. Then he sat down for a smoke, and he was looking at them through the window when I drove away."

"Ah," commented Sally, "you want somebody to keep the house straight and look after you. Didn't you know any nice girls back there in the Old Country?"

She spoke naturally, and there was nothing to show that the girl's heart beat a little more rapidly than usual as she watched Hawtrey. His face, however, grew a trifle graver, for she had touched upon a momentous question to such men as he. Living in Spartan simplicity upon the prairie, there are a good many of them, well-trained, well-connected young Englishmen, and others like them from Canadian cities. They naturally look for some grace of culture or refinement in the woman they would marry, and there are few women of the station to which they once belonged who could face the loneliness and unassisted drudgery that must be borne by the small wheat-grower's wife. There were also reasons why this question had been troubling Hawtrey in particular of late.

"Oh, yes, of course, I knew nice girls in England, one or two," he answered. "I'm not quite sure, however, that girls of that kind would find things even moderately comfortable here."

A certain reflectiveness in his tone, which seemed to indicate that he had already given the matter some consideration, jarred upon Sally. Moreover, she had an ample share of the Western farmer's pride, which firmly declines to believe that there is any land to compare with the one the plow is slowly wresting from the wide white levels of the prairie.

"We make out well enough," she asserted with a snap in her eyes.

Hawtrey made an expressive gesture. "Oh, yes," he admitted, "it's in you. All you want in order to beat the wilderness and turn it into a garden is an ax, a span of oxen, and a breaker plow. You ought to be proud of your energy. Still, you see, our folks back yonder aren't quite the same as you."

Sally partly understood him. "Ah," she replied, "they want more, and, perhaps, they're used to having more than we have; but isn't that in one way their misfortune? Is it what folks want, or what they can do, that makes them of use to anybody else?"

There was a hard truth in her suggestion, but Hawtrey, who seldom occupied himself with matters of that kind, smiled.

"Oh," he said, "I don't know; but, after all, it wouldn't be worth while for us to raise wheat here unless there were folks back East to eat it, and, if some of them only eat in the shape of dainty cakes, that doesn't affect the question. Anyway, there will be but another dance or two, and I was wondering whether I could drive you home; I've got Wyllard's Ontario sleigh."

Sally glanced at him rather sharply. She had half-expected this offer, and it is possible would have judiciously led him up to it if he had not made it. Now, as she saw that he really wished to drive her home, she was glad that she had not deliberately encouraged the invitation.

"Yes," she answered softly, "I think you could."

"Then," said Hawtrey, "if you'll wait ten minutes I'll be back with the team."

CHAPTER II

SALLY TAKES CHARGE

THE night was clear and bitterly cold when Hawtrey and Sally Creighton drove away from Stukely's barn. Winter had lingered unusually long that year, and the prairie gleamed dimly white, with the sledge trail cutting athwart it, a smear of blue-gray in the foreground. It was—for Lander's lay behind them with the snow among the stubble belts that engirdled it—an empty wilderness that the mettlesome team swung across, and during the first few minutes the cold struck through the horses with a sting like the thrust of steel. A half moon, coppery red with frost, hung low above the snow-covered earth, and there was no sound but the crunch beneath the runners, and the beat of hoofs that rang dully through the silence like a roll of muffled drums.

Sleighs like the one that Hawtrey drove are not common on the prairie, where the farmer generally uses the humble bob-sled when the snow lies unusually long. It had been made for use in Montreal, and bought back East by a friend of Hawtrey's, who was possessed of some means, which is a somewhat unusual thing in the case of a Western wheat-grower. This man also had bought the team—the fastest he could obtain—and when the warmth came back to the horses Hawtrey and the girl became conscious of the exhilaration of the swift and easy motion. The sleigh was light and narrow, and Hawtrey, who drew the thick driving-robe higher about Sally, did not immediately draw the mittened hand he had used back again.

The girl did not resent the fact that it still rested behind her shoulder, nor did Hawtrey attach any particular significance to the fact. He was a man who usually acted on impulse. How far Sally understood him did not appear, but she came of folk who had waged a stubborn battle with the wilderness, and there was a vein of grim tenacity in her.

She was, however, conscious that there was something beneath her feet which forced her, if she was to sit comfortably, rather close against her companion; and it seemed expedient to point it out.

"Can't you move a little? I can't get my feet fixed right," she said.

Hawtrey looked down at her with a smile. "I'm afraid I can't unless I get right outside. Aren't you happy there?"

It was the kind of speech he was in the habit of making, but there was rather more color in the girl's face than the stinging night air brought there, and she glanced at the bottom of the sleigh.

"It's a sack of some kind, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes," Hawtrey answered, "it's a couple of three-bushel bags. Some special seed Lorton sent to Winnipeg for. Ormond brought them out from the railroad. I promised I'd take them along to him."

"You should have told me. It's most a league round by Lorton's place," Sally returned with reproach in her voice.

"That won't take long with this team. Have you any great objections to another fifteen minutes' drive with me?"

Sally looked up at him, and the moonlight was on her face, which was unusually pretty in the radiance of the brilliant night.

"No," she admitted, "I haven't any."

She spoke demurely, but there was a perceptible something in her voice which might have warned the man, had he been in the habit of taking warning from anything, which, however, was not the case. It was one of his weaknesses that he seldom thought about what he did until he was compelled to face the consequences; and it was, perhaps, to his credit that he had after all done very little harm, for there was hot blood in him.

"Well," he responded, "I'm not going to grumble about those extra three miles, but you were asking what land I meant to break this spring. What put that into your mind?"

"Our folks," Sally replied candidly. "They were talking about you."

This again was significant, but Hawtrey did not notice it.

"I've no doubt they said I ought to tackle the new quarter section," he suggested.

"Yes," assented Sally. "Why don't you do it? Last fall you thrashed out quite a big harvest."

"I certainly did. There, however, didn't seem to be many dollars left over when I'd faced the bills."

The girl made a little gesture of impatience. "Oh, Bob and Jake and Jasper sowed on less backsetting," she said, "and they're buying new teams and plows. Can't you do what they do, though I guess they don't go off for weeks to Winnipeg?"

The man was silent. He had an incentive for hard work about which she was ignorant, and he had certainly done much, but the long, iron winter, when there was nothing that could be done, had proved too severe a test for him. It was very dreary sitting alone evening after evening beside the stove, and the company of the somnolent Sproatly was not cheerful. Now and then his pleasure-loving nature had revolted from the barrenness of his lot when, stiff and cold, he drove home from an odd visit to a neighbor, and arriving in the dark found the stove had burned out and water had frozen hard inside the house. These were things his neighbors patiently endured, but Hawtrey had fled for life and brightness to Winnipeg.

Sally glanced up at him with a little nod. "You take hold with a good grip. Everybody allows that," she observed. "The trouble is you let things go afterwards. You don't stay with it."

"Yes," assented Hawtrey. "I believe you have hit it, Sally. That's very much what's the matter with me."

"Then," said the girl with quiet insistence, "won't you try?"

A faint flush crept into Hawtrey's face. Sally was less than half-taught, and unacquainted with anything beyond the simple, strenuous life of the prairie. Her greatest accomplishments consisted of some skill in bakery and the handling of half-broken teams; but she had once or twice given him what he recognized as excellent advice. There was something incongruous in the situation, but, as usual, he preferred to regard it whimsically.

"I suppose I'll have to, if you insist. If ever I'm the grasping owner of the biggest farm in this district I'll blame you," he answered.

Sally said nothing further on that subject, and some time later the sleigh went skimming down among the birches in a shallow ravine. Hawtrey pulled the horses up when they reached the bottom of the ravine, and glanced up at a shapeless cluster of buildings that showed black amid the trees.

"Lorton won't be back until to-morrow, but I promised to pitch the bags into his granary," he said. "If I hump them up the trail here it will save us driving round through the bluff."

He got down, and though the bags were heavy, with Sally's assistance he managed to hoist the first of them on to his shoulders. Then he staggered with it up the steep foot-trail that climbed the slope. He was more or less accustomed to carrying bags of grain between store and wagon, but his mittened hands were numbed, and his joints were stiff with cold. Sally noticed that he floundered rather wildly. In another moment or two, however, he vanished into the gloom among the trees, and she sat listening to the uneven crunch of his footsteps in the snow, until there was a sudden crash of broken branches, and a sound as of something falling heavily down a declivity. Then there was another crash, and stillness again.

Sally gasped, and clenched her mittened hands hard upon the reins as she remembered that Lorton's by-trail skirted the edge of a very steep bank, but she lost neither her collectedness nor her nerve. Presence of mind in the face of an emergency is probably as much a question of experience as of temperament, and, like other women in that country, she had seen men struck down by half-trained horses, crushed by collapsing strawpiles, and once or twice gashed by mower blades. This was no doubt why she remembered that the impatient team would probably move on if she left the sleigh, and therefore drove the horses to the first of the birches before she got down. Then she knotted the reins about a branch, and called out sharply.

No answer came out of the shadows, and her heart beat unpleasantly fast as she plunged in among the trees, keeping below the narrow trail that went slanting up the side of the declivity, until she stopped, with another gasp, when she reached a spot where a ray of moonlight filtered down. A limp figure in an old skin coat lay almost at her feet, and she dropped on her knees beside it in the snow. Hawtrey's face showed an unpleasant grayish-white in the faint silvery light.

"Gregory," she cried hoarsely.

The man opened his eyes, and blinked at her in a half-dazed manner. "Fell down," he said. "Think I felt my leg go—and my side's stabbing me. Go for somebody."

Sally glanced round, and noticed that the grain bag lay burst open not far away. She fancied that he had clung to it after he lost his footing, which explained why he had fallen so heavily, but that was not a point of any consequence now. There was nobody who could help her within two leagues of the spot, and it was evident that she could not leave him there to freeze. Then she noticed that the trees grew rather farther apart just there, and rising swiftly she ran back to bring the team. The ascent was steep, and she had to urge the horses, with sharp cries and blows from her mittened hand, among shadowy tree trunks and through snapping undergrowth before she reached the spot where Hawtrey lay. He looked up at her when at last the horses stood close beside him.

"You can't turn them here," he told her faintly.

Sally was never sure how she managed it, for the sleigh drove against the slender trunks, and the fiery beasts, terrified by the snapping of the undergrowth, were almost unmanageable; but at last they were facing the descent again, and she stooped and twined her arms about the shoulders of Hawtrey, who now lay almost against the sleigh.

"It's going to hurt, Gregory, but I have got to get you in," she warned him.

Then she gasped, for Hawtrey was a man of full stature, and it was a heavy lift. She could not raise him wholly, and he cried out once when his injured leg trailed in the snow. Still, with the most strenuous effort she had ever made she moved him a yard or so, and then staggering fell with her side against the sleigh. She felt faint with the pain of it, but with another desperate lift she drew him into the sleigh, and let him sink down gently upon the bag that still lay there. His eyes had shut again, and he said nothing now.

It required only another moment or two to wrap the thick driving-robe about him, and after that, with one hand still beneath his neck, she glanced down. It was clear that he was quite unconscious of her presence, and stooping swiftly she kissed his gray face. She settled herself in the driving-seat with only a blanket coat to shelter her from the cold, and the horses went cautiously down the slope. She did not urge them until they reached the level, for the trail that wound up out of the ravine was difficult, but when the wide white expanse once more stretched away before them she laid the biting whip across their backs.

That was quite sufficient. They were fiery animals, and when they broke into a furious gallop the rush of night wind struck her tingling cheeks like a lash of wires. All power of feeling went out of her hands, her arms grew stiff and heavy, and she was glad that the trail led smooth and straight to the horizon. Hawtrey, who had moved a little, lay helpless across her feet. He did not answer when she spoke to him.

The team went far at the gallop. A fine mist of snow beat against the sleigh, but the girl leaning forward, a tense figure, with nerveless hands clenched upon the reins, saw nothing but the blue-gray riband of trail that steadily unrolled itself before her. At length a blurred mass, which she knew to be a birch bluff, grew out of the white waste, and presently a cluster of darker smudges shot up into the shape of a log-house, sod stables, and straw-pile granary. A minute or two later, she pulled the team up with an effort, and a man, who flung the door of the house open, came out into the moonlight. He stopped, and gazed at her in astonishment.

"Miss Creighton!" he said.

"Don't stand there," cried Sally. "Take the near horse's head, and lead them right up to the door."

"What's the matter?" the man asked stupidly.

"Lead the team up," ordered Sally. "Jump, if you can."

It was supposed that Sproatly had never moved with much expedition in his life, but that night he sprang towards the horses at a commanding wave of the girl's hand. He started when he saw his comrade lying in the bottom of the sleigh, but Sally disregarded his hurried questions.

"Help me to get him out," she said, when he stopped the team. "Keep his right leg as straight as you can. I don't want to lift him. We must slide him in."

They did it somehow, though the girl was breathless before their task was finished, and the perspiration started from the man. Then Sally turned to Sproatly.

"Get into the sleigh, and don't spare the team," she said. "Drive over to Watson's, and bring him along. You can tell him your partner's broke his leg, and some of his ribs. Start right now!"

Sproatly did her bidding, and when the door closed behind him she flung off her blanket coat and thrust plenty of wood into the stove. She looked for some coffee in the cupboard, and put on a kettle, after which she sat down on the floor by Hawtrey's side. He lay still, with the thick driving-robe beneath him, and though the color was creeping back into his face, his eyes were shut, and he was apparently quite unconscious of her presence. For the first time she was aware of a distressful faintness, which, as she had come suddenly out of the stinging frost into the little overheated room that reeked with tobacco smoke and a stale smell of cooking, was not astonishing. She mastered her dizziness, however, and presently, seeing that Hawtrey did not move, glanced about her with some curiosity, for it was the first time she had entered his house.

The room was scantily furnished, and, though very few of the bachelor farmers in that country live luxuriously, she fancied that Sproatly, who had evidently very rudimentary ideas on the subject of house-cleaning, had not brought back all the sundries he had thrown out into the snow. It contained a table, a carpenter's bench, and a couple of chairs. There were still smears of dust upon the uncovered floor. The birch-log walls had been rudely paneled half-way up, but the half-seasoned boards had cracked with the heat, and exuded streaks of resin to which the grime and dust had clung. A pail, which contained potato peelings, stood amid a litter of old long-boots and broken harness against one wall. The floor was black and thick with grease all round the rusty stove. A pile of unwashed dishes and cooking utensils stood upon the table, and the lamp above her head had blackened the boarded ceiling.

Sally noticed it all with disgust, and then, seeing that

Hawtrey had opened his eyes, she made a cup of coffee and persuaded him to drink it. After that he smiled at her.

"Thanks," he said feebly. "Where's Sproatly? My side stabs me."

Sally raised one hand. "You're not to say a word," she cautioned. "Sproatly's gone for Watson, and he'll soon fix you up. Now lie quite still, and shut your eyes again."

Hawtrey obeyed her injunction to lie still, but his eyes were not more than half-closed, and she could not resist the temptation to see what he would do if she went away. She had half risen, when he stretched out a hand and felt for her dress, and she sank down again with a curious softness in her face. Then he let his eyes close altogether, as if satisfied, and by and by she gently laid her hand on his.

He did not appear to notice it, and, though she did not know whether he was asleep or unconscious, she sat beside him, watching him with compassion in her eyes. There was no sound but the snapping of the birch billets in the rusty stove. She was anxious, but not unduly so, for she knew that men who live as the prairie farmers do usually more or less readily recover from such injuries as had befallen him. It would not be very long before assistance arrived, for it was understood that the man for whom she had sent Sproatly had almost completed a medical course in an Eastern city before he became a prairie farmer. Why he had suddenly changed his profession was a point he did not explain, and, as he had always shown himself willing to do what he could when any of his neighbors met with an accident, nobody troubled him about the matter.

By and by Sproatly brought Watson to the homestead, and he was busy with Hawtrey for some time. Then they got him to bed, and Watson came back to the room where Sally was anxiously waiting.

"Hawtrey's idea about his injuries is more or less correct, but we'll have no great trouble in pulling him round," he said. "The one point that's worrying me is the looking after him. One couldn't expect him to thrive upon slabs of burnt salt pork, and Sproatly's bread."

"I'll do what I can," said Sproatly indignantly.

"You!" replied Watson. "It would be criminal to leave you in charge of a sick man."

Sally quietly put on her blanket coat. "If you can stay a few hours, I'll be back soon after it's light," she said. She turned to Sproatly. "You can wash up those dishes on the table, and get a brush and sweep this room out. If it's not quite neat to-morrow you'll do it again."

Sproatly grinned as she went out. A few moments later the girl drove away through the bitter frost.

CHAPTER III

WYLLARD ASSENTS

SALLY, who returned with her mother, passed a fortnight at Hawtrey's homestead before Watson decided that his patient could be entrusted to Sproatly's care. Afterwards she went back twice a week to make sure that Sproatly, in whom she had no confidence, was discharging his duties satisfactorily. With baskets of dainties for the invalid she had driven over one afternoon, when Hawtrey, whose bones were knitting well, lay talking to another man in his little sleeping-room.

There was no furniture in the room except the wooden bunk in which he lay, and a deerhide lounge chair he had made. The stovepipe from the kitchen led across part of one corner, and then up again into the room beneath the roof above. It had been one of Sproatly's duties since the accident to rise and renew the fire soon after midnight, and when Sally arrived he was outside the house, whipsawing birch-logs and splitting them, an occupation he profoundly disliked.

Spring had come suddenly, as it usually does on the prairie, and the snow was melting fast under a brilliant sun. The bright rays that streamed in through the window struck athwart the glimmering dust motes in the little bare room, and fell, pleasantly warm, upon the man who sat in the deerhide chair. He was a year or two older than Hawtrey, though he had scarcely reached thirty. He was a man of average height, and somewhat spare of figure. His manner was tranquil and his lean, bronzed face attractive. He held a pipe in his hand, and was looking at Hawtrey with quiet, contemplative eyes, that were his most noticeable feature, though it was difficult to say whether their color was gray or hazel-brown, for they were singularly clear, and there was something which suggested steadfastness in their unwavering gaze. The man wore long boots, trousers of old blue duck, and a jacket of soft deerskin such as the Blackfeet dress so expertly; and there was nothing about him to suggest that he was a man of varied experience, and of some importance in that country.

Harry Wyllard was native-born. In his young days he had assisted his father in the working of a little Manitoban farm, when the great grain province was still, for the most part, a wilderness. A prosperous relative on the Pacific slope had sent him to Toronto University, where after a session or two he had become involved in a difference of opinion with the authorities. Though the matter was never made quite clear, it was generally believed that Wyllard had quietly borne the blame of a comrade's action, for there was a vein of eccentric generosity in the lad. In any case, he left Toronto, and the relative, who was largely interested in the fur business, next sent him north to the Behring Sea. The business was then a hazardous one, for the skin buyers and pelagic sealers had trouble with the Alaskan representatives of American trading companies, upon whose preserves they poached, as well as with the commanders of the gunboats sent up north to protect the seals.

Men's lives were staked against the value of a fur, edicts were lightly contravened, and now and then a schooner barely escaped into the smothering fog with skins looted on forbidden beaches. It was a perilous life, and a strenuous one, for every white man's hand was against the traders; there were rangers in fog and gale, and the reefs that lay in the tideways of almost uncharted waters; but Wyllard made the most of his chance. He kept the peace with jealous skippers who resented the presence of a man they might command as mate, but whose views they were forced to listen to when he spoke as supercargo. He won the good-will of sea-bred Indians, and drove a good trade with them; he not infrequently brought his boat loaded with reeking skins back first to the plunging schooner.

He fell into trouble again when they were hanging off the Eastern Isles under double reefs, watching for the Russians' seals. A boat's crew from another schooner had been cast ashore, and, as the men were in peril of falling into the Russians' hands, Wyllard led a reckless expedition to rescue them. He succeeded, in so far that the wrecked sailors were taken off the beach through a tumult of breaking surf; but as the relief crews pulled seaward the fog shut down on them, and one boat, manned by three men, never reached the schooners. The vessels blew horns all night, and crept along the smoking beach next day, though the surf made landing impossible. Then a sudden gale drove them off the shore, and, as it was evident that their comrades must have perished, they reluctantly sailed for other fishing grounds. As one result of this, Wyllard broke with his prosperous relative when he went back to Vancouver.

After that he helped to strengthen railroad bridges among the mountains of British Columbia. He worked in logging camps, and shoveled in the mines, and, as it happened, met Hawtrey, who, tempted by high wages, had spent a winter in the Mountain Province. Wyllard's father, who had taken up virgin soil in Assiniboia, died soon after Wyllard went back to him, and a few months later the relative in Vancouver also died. Somewhat to Wyllard's astonishment, his kinsman bequeathed him a considerable property, most of the proceeds of which he sank in acres of virgin prairie. Willow Range was now one of the largest farms between Winnipeg and the Rockies.

"The leg's getting along satisfactorily?" Wyllard inquired at length.

Hawtrey, who appeared unusually thoughtful, admitted that it was.

"Anyway, it's singularly unfortunate that I'm disabled just now," he added. "There's the plowing to begin in a week or two, and besides that I was thinking of getting married."

Wyllard was somewhat astonished at this announcement. For one thing, he was more or less acquainted with the state of his friend's finances. During the next moment or two he glanced meditatively through the open door into the adjoining room, where Sally Creighton was busy beside the stove. The sleeves of the girl's light bodice were rolled up well above the elbow, and she had pretty, round arms, which were just then partly immersed in dough.

"I don't think there's a nicer or more capable girl in this part of Assiniboia," he remarked.

"Oh, yes," agreed Hawtrey. "Anybody would admit that. Still, since you seem so sure of it, why don't you marry her yourself?"

Wyllard looked at his comrade curiously. "Well," he said, "there are several reasons that don't affect Miss Sally and only concern myself. Besides, it's highly improbable that she'd have me." Before he looked up again he paused to light his pipe, which had gone out. "Since it evidently isn't Sally, have I met the lady?" he asked.

"You haven't. She's in England."

"It's four years, isn't it, since you were over there?"

Hawtrey lay silent a minute, and then made a little confidential gesture.

"I'd better tell you all about the thing," he said. "Our folks were people of some little standing in the county. In fact, as they were far from rich, they had just standing enough to embarrass them. In most respects, they were ultra-conventional with old-fashioned ideas, and, though there was no open break, I'm afraid I didn't get on with them quite as well as I should have done, which is why I came out to Canada. They started me on the land decently, and twice when we'd harvested frost and horse-sickness, they sent along the draft I asked them for. That is one reason why I'm not going to worry them, though I'd very much like another now. You see, there are two girls, as well as Reggie, who's reading for the Bar."

"I don't think you have mentioned the lady yet."

"She's a connection of some friends of ours. Her mother, so far as I understand it, married beneath her—a man her family didn't like. The father and mother died, and Agatha, who was brought up by the father's relations, was often at the Grange, a little, old-fashioned, half-ruinous place, a mile or two from where we live in the North of England. The Grange belongs to her mother's folks, but I think there was still a feud between them and her father's people, who had her trained to earn her living. We saw a good deal of each other, and fell in love, as boy and girl will. Well, when I went back, one winter, after I'd been here two years, Agatha was at the Grange again, and we decided then that I was to bring her out as soon as I had a home to offer her."

Hawtrey broke off for a moment, and there was a trace of embarrassment in his manner when he went on again. "Perhaps I ought to have managed it sooner," he added. "Still, things never seem to go quite as one would like with me, and you can understand that a dainty, delicate girl reared in comfort in England would find it rough out here."

Wyllard glanced round the bare room in which he sat, and into the other, which was also furnished in a remarkably primitive manner.

"Yes," he assented, "I can quite realize that."

"Well," said Hawtrey, "it's a thing that has been worrying me a good deal of late, because, as a matter of fact, I'm not much farther forward than I was four years ago. In the meanwhile, Agatha, who has some talent for music, was in a first-class master's hands. Afterwards she gave lessons, and got odd singing engagements. A week ago, I had a letter from her in which she said that her throat was giving out."

He stopped again for a moment, with trouble in his face, and then fumbling under his pillow produced a letter, which he carefully folded.

"We're rather good friends," he observed. "You can read that part of it."

Wyllard took the letter, and a suggestion of quickening interest crept into his eyes as he read. Then he looked up at Hawtrey.

"It's a brave letter—the kind a brave girl would write," he commented. "Still, it's evident that she's anxious."

For a moment or two there was silence, which was broken only by Sally clattering about the stove.

Dissimilar in character, as they were, the two men were firm friends, and there had been a day when, as they worked upon a dizzy railroad trestle, Hawtrey had held

Wyllard fast when a plank slipped away. He had thought nothing of the matter, but Wyllard was one who remembered things of that kind.

"Now," said Hawtrey, after a long pause, "you see my trouble. This place isn't fit for her, and I couldn't even go across for some time yet. But her father's folks have died off, and there's nothing to be expected from her mother's relatives. Any way, she can't be left to face the blow alone. It's unthinkable. Well, there's only one course open to me, and that's to raise as much money on a mortgage as I can, fit the place out with fixings brought from Winnipeg, and sow a double acreage with borrowed capital. I'll send for her as soon as I can get the house made a little more comfortable."

Wyllard sat silent a moment or two, and then leaned forward in his chair.

"No," he objected, "there are two other and wiser courses. Tell the girl what things are like here, and just how you stand. She'd face it bravely. There's no doubt of that."

Hawtrey looked at him sharply. "I believe she would, but considering that you have never seen her, I don't quite know why you should be sure of it."

Wyllard smiled. "The girl who wrote that letter wouldn't flinch."

"Well," said Hawtrey, "you can mention the second course."

"I'll let you have $1,000 at bank interest—which is less than any land-broker would charge you—without a mortgage."

Again Hawtrey showed a certain embarrassment. "No," he replied, "I'm afraid it can't be done. I had a kind of claim upon my people, though it must be admitted that I've worked it off, but I can't quite bring myself to borrow money from my friends."

Wyllard, who saw that he meant it, made a gesture of resignation. "Then you must let the girl make the most of it, but keep out of the hands of the mortgage man. By the way, I haven't told you that I've decided to make a trip to the Old Country. We had a bonanza crop last season, and Martial could run the range for a month or two. After all, my father was born yonder, and I can't help feeling now and then that I should have made an effort to trace up that young Englishman's relatives, and tell them what became of him."

"The one you struck in British Columbia? You have mentioned him, but, so far as I remember, you never gave me any particulars about the thing."

Wyllard seemed to hesitate, which was not a habit of his.

"There is," he said, "not much to tell. I struck the lad sitting down, played out, upon a trail that led over a big divide. It was clear that he couldn't get any further, and there wasn't a settlement within a good many leagues of the spot. We were up in the ranges prospecting then. Well, we made camp and gave him supper—he couldn't eat very much—and afterwards he told me what brought him there. It seemed to me he had always been weedy in the chest, but he had been working waist-deep in an icy creek, building a dam at a mine, until his lungs had given out. The mining boss was a hard case and had no mercy on him, but the lad, who had had a rough time in the Mountain Province, stayed with it until he played out altogether."

Wyllard's face hardened as he mentioned the mining boss, and a curious little sparkle crept into his eyes, but after a pause he proceeded quietly:

"We did what we could for the boy. In fact, it rather broke up the prospecting trip, but he was too far gone. He hung for a week or two, and one of us brought a doctor out from the settlements, but the day before we broke camp Jake and I buried him."

Hawtrey made a sign of comprehension. He was reasonably well acquainted with his comrade's character, and fancied he knew who had brought the doctor out. He knew also that Wyllard had been earning his living as a railroad navvy or chopper then, and, in view of the cost of provisions brought by pack-horse into the remoter bush, the reason why he had abandoned his prospecting trip after spending a week or two taking care of the sick lad was clear enough.

"You never learned his name?" Hawtrey asked.

"I didn't," answered Wyllard. "I went back to the mine, but several things suggested that the name upon the pay-roll wasn't his real one. He began a broken message the night he died, but the hemorrhage cut him off in the middle of it. The wish that I should tell his people somehow was in his eyes."

Wyllard broke off for a moment with the deprecatory gesture, which in connection with the story was very expressive.

"I have never done it, but how could I? All I know is that he was a delicately brought up young Englishman, and the only clew I have is a watch with a London maker's name on it and a girl's photograph. I've a very curious notion that I shall meet that girl some day."

Hawtrey, who made no comment, lay still for a minute or two, but his face suggested that he was considering something.

"Harry," he said presently, "I shall not be fit for a journey for quite a while yet, and if I went over to England I couldn't get the plowing done and the crop in; which, if I'm going to be married, is absolutely necessary."

There was no doubt about the truth of the statement, for the small Western farmer has very seldom a balance in hand, and for that matter, is not infrequently in debt to the nearest storekeeper. He must, as a rule, secure a harvest or abandon his holding, since as soon as the crop is thrashed the bills pour in. Wyllard made a sign of assent.

"Well," Hawtrey went on, "if you're going to England you could go as my deputy. You could make Agatha understand what things are like here, and bring her out to me. I'll arrange for the wedding to be soon as she arrives."

Wyllard was not a conventional person, but he pointed out several objections. Hawtrey overruled them, however, and eventually Wyllard reluctantly assented.

"As it happens, Mrs. Hastings is going over, too, and if she comes back about the same time the thing might be managed," he said. "I believe she's in Winnipeg just now, but I'll write to her. By the way, have you a photograph of Agatha?"

"I haven't," Hawtrey answered. "She gave me one, but somehow it got mislaid on house-cleaning. That's rather an admission, isn't it?"

It occurred to Wyllard that it certainly was. In fact, it struck him as a very curious thing that Hawtrey should have lost the picture which the girl with whom he was in love had given him. He sat silent for a moment or two, and then stood up.

"When I hear from Mrs. Hastings I'll drive around again. Candidly, the thing has somewhat astonished me. I always had a fancy it would be Sally."

Hawtrey laughed. "Sally?" he replied. "We're first-rate friends, but I never had the faintest notion of marrying her."

Wyllard went out to harness his team, and he did not notice that Sally, who had approached the door with a tray in her hands a moment or two earlier, drew back before him softly. When he had crossed the room she set down the tray and, with her cheeks burning, leaned upon the table. Then, feeling that she could not stay in the stove-heated room, she went out, and stood in the slushy snow. One of her hands was tightly closed, and all the color had vanished from her cheeks. However, she contrived to give Hawtrey his supper by and by, and soon afterwards drove away.

CHAPTER IV

A CRISIS

While Wyllard made arrangements for his journey, and Sally Creighton went very quietly about her work on the lonely prairie farm, it happened one evening that Miss Winifred Rawlinson sat uneasily expectant far back under the gallery of a concert-hall in an English manufacturing town. In her back seat Miss Rawlinson could not hear very well, but it was the cheapest place she could obtain, and economy was of some little importance to her. Besides, by craning her neck a little to avoid the hat of the strikingly dressed young woman in front of her, she could, at least, see the stage. The programme which she held in one hand announced that Miss Agatha Ismay would sing a certain aria from a great composer's oratorio. Miss Rawlinson leaned further forward in her chair when a girl of about her own age, which was twenty-four, slowly advanced to the center of the stage.

The girl on the stage was a tall, well-made, brown-haired girl, with a quiet grace of movement and a comely face. She was attired in a long trailing dress of a shimmering corn-straw tint. Agatha Ismay had sung at unimportant concerts with marked success, but that evening there was something very like shrinking in her eyes.

A crash of chords from the piano melted into a rippling prelude, and Winifred breathed easier when her friend began to sing. The voice was sweet and excellently trained, and there was a deep stillness of appreciation when the clear notes thrilled through the closely-packed hall. No one could doubt that the first part of the aria was a success, for half-subdued applause broke out when the voice sank into silence, and for a few moments the piano rippled on alone; but it seemed to Winifred that there was a look of tension in the singer's face, and she grew uneasy, for she understood the cause for it.

"The last bit of the second part's rather trying," remarked a young man behind her. "There's an awkward jump at two full tones that was too much for our soprano when we tried it at the choral union. Miss Ismay's voice is very true in intonation, but I don't suppose most of the audience would notice it if she shirked a little and left that high sharp out."

Winifred had little knowledge of music, but she was sufficiently acquainted with her friend's character to be certain that Agatha would not attempt to leave out the sharp in question. This was one reason why she sat rigidly still when the clear voice rang out again. It rose from note to note, full and even, but she could see the singer's face, and there was no doubt whatever that Agatha was making a strenuous effort. Nobody else, however, seemed to notice it, for Winifred flung a swift glance around, and then fixed her eyes upon the dominant figure in the corn-straw dress. The sweet voice was still rising and the interested listener hoped that the accompanist would force the tone to cover it a little, and put on the loud pedal. The pianist, however, was gazing at his music, and played on until, with startling suddenness, the climax came.

The voice sank a full tone, rose, and hoarsely trailed off into silence again. Then the accompanist glanced over his shoulder, and struck a ringing chord while he waited for a sign. There was a curious stirring in the audience. The girl in the shimmering dress stood quite still for a moment with a spot of crimson in her cheek and a half-dazed look in her eyes. Then, turning swiftly, she moved off the stage.

Winifred rose with a gasp, and turned upon the young man next her, who looked up inquiringly.

"Yes," she said sharply; "can't you let me pass? I'm going out."

It was about half-past nine when she reached the wet street. A fine rain drove into her face, and she had rather more than a mile to walk without an escort, but that was a matter which caused her no concern. She was a self-reliant young woman, and accustomed to going about unattended. She was quite aware that the scene she had just witnessed would bring about a crisis in her own and her friend's affairs. For all that, she was unpleasantly conscious of the leak in one shabby boot when she stepped down from the sidewalk to cross the street, and when she opened her umbrella beneath a gas lamp she pursed up her mouth. There were holes in the umbrella near where the ribs ran into the ferrule; she had not noticed them before. She, however, resolutely plodded on through the drizzle, until three young fellows who came with linked arms down the pavement of a quieter street barred her way. One wore his hat on one side, the one nearest the curb flourished a little cane, and the third smiled at her fatuously.

"Oh my!" he jeered. "Where's dear Jemima off to in such a hurry?"

Winifred drew herself up. She was little and determined, and, it must be admitted, not quite unaccustomed to that kind of thing.

"Will you let me pass?" she asked angrily. "There's a policeman at the next turning."

"There really is," said one of the youths. "The Dook has another engagement. Dream of me, Olivia!"

A beat of heavy feet drew nearer, and the three roysterers disappeared in the direction of a flaming music-hall, where the second "house" was probably beginning. Winifred, who had stepped into the gutter to avoid the roysterer with the cane, turned as a stalwart, blue-coated figure moved towards her.

"Thank you, officer," she said, "they've gone."

The policeman merely raised a hand as if in comprehension, and plodded back to his post. Winifred went on until she let herself into a house in a quiet street, and ascending to the second floor entered a simply furnished room, which, however, contained a piano, and a table on which a typewriter stood amid a litter of papers. The girl took off her water-proof and sat down in a low chair beside the little fire. She was not a handsome girl, and it was evident that she did not trouble herself greatly about her attire. Her face was too thin and her figure too slight and spare, but there was usually, even when she was anxious, as she certainly was that night, a shrewdly whimsical twinkle in her eyes, and though her lips were set, her expression was compassionate.

She was not the person to sit still very long, and in a minute or two she rose to place a little kettle on the fire. She took a few scones, a coffee-pot, and a tin of condensed milk from a cupboard. When she had spread them out upon a table she discovered that there was some of the condensed milk upon her fingers, and it must be admitted that she sucked them. They were little, stubby fingers, which somehow looked capable.

"It must have been four o'clock when I had that bun and a cup of tea," she remarked, half aloud.

She glanced at the table longingly, for she occasionally found it necessary to place a certain check upon a healthy appetite. The practice of such self-denial is

"THERE WAS A STRAINED LOOK IN HER EYES AND HER FACE WAS VERY WEARY"

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unfortunately, not a very unusual thing in the case of many young women who work hard in the great cities.

"I must wait for Agatha," she said, with a resolute shake of the head. Crossing the room toward the typewriter table she stopped to glance at a little framed photograph that stood upon the mantel. It was a portrait of Gregory Hawtrey taken years before, and she apostrophized it with quiet scorn.

"Now you're wanted you're naturally away out yonder," she declared accusingly. "You're like the rest of them—despicable!"

This seemed to relieve her feelings, and she sat down before the typewriter, which clicked and rattled for several minutes under her stubby fingers. The clicking ceased with sudden abruptness, and she prodded the carriage of the machine viciously with a hairpin. As this appeared unavailing, she used her forefinger, and when at length it slid along the rod with a clash there was a smear of grimy oil upon her cheek and her nose. The machine gave no further trouble, and she endeavored to make up some of the time that she had spent at the concert. It was necessary that it should be made up, but she was conscious that she was putting off an evil moment.

At last the door opened, and Agatha Ismay, wrapped in a long cloak, came in. She permitted Winifred to take her wrap from her, and then sank down into a chair. There was a strained look in her eyes, and her face was very weary.

"You're working late again," she observed.

Winifred nodded. "It's the men who loaf, my dear," she replied. "When you undertake the transcription of an author's scrawl at ninepence the thousand words you have to work hard, especially when, as it is in this case, the thing's practically unreadable. Besides, the woman in it makes me lose my temper. If I'd had a man of the kind described to deal with I'd have thrashed him."

She was talking at random, partly to conceal her anxiety, and partly with the charitable purpose of giving her companion time to approach the subject that must be mentioned; but she rather overdid her effort to appear at ease. Agatha looked at her sharply.

"Winny," she said, "you know. You've been there."

Winifred turned towards her quietly, for she could face a crisis.

"Yes," she confessed, "I have, but you're not going to talk about it until you have had supper. Don't move until I make the coffee."

She was genuinely hungry, but while she satisfied her own appetite she took care that her companion, who did not seem inclined to eat, made a simple meal. Then she put the plates into a cupboard and sat down facing Agatha.

"Well," she said, "you have broken down exactly as that throat specialist said you would. The first question is, how long it will be before you can go on again?"

Agatha laughed, a little harsh laugh. "I didn't tell you everything at the time: I've broken down for good," she answered.

There was a moment of tense silence, and then Agatha made a dejected gesture. "The specialist warned me that this might happen if I went on singing, but what could I do? I couldn't cancel my engagements without telling people why. The physician said I must go to Norway and give my throat and chest a rest."

They looked at each other, and there was in their eyes the half-bitter, half-weary smile of those to whom the cure prescribed is ludicrously impossible. It was Winifred who spoke first.

"Then," she commented, "we have to face the situation, and it's not an encouraging one. Our joint earnings just keep us here in decency—we won't say comfort—and they're evidently to be subject to a big reduction. It strikes me as a rather curious coincidence that a letter from that man in Canada and one from your prosperous friends in the country arrived just before you went out."

She saw the look in Agatha's eyes, and spread her hands out.

"Yes," she admitted; "I hid them. It seemed to me that you had quite enough upon your mind this evening. I don't know whether the letters are likely to throw any fresh light upon the question what we're going to do."

She produced the letters from a drawer in her table, and Agatha straightened herself suddenly in her chair when she had opened the first of them.

"Oh," she cried, "he wants me to go out to him!"

Winifred's face set hard for a moment, but it relaxed again, and she contrived to hide her dismay.

"Then," she suggested, "I suppose you'll certainly go. After all, he's probably not worse to live with than most of them."

Miss Rawlinson was occasionally a little bitter, but, like others of her kind, she had been compelled to compete in an overcrowded market with hard-driven men. She was, however, sincerely attached to her friend, and she smiled when she saw the flash in Agatha's eyes.

"Oh," she added, "you needn't try to wither me with your indignation. No doubt he's precisely what he ought to be, and I dare say it will ease your feelings if you talk about him again; at least it will help you to formulate your reasons for going out to him. I'll listen patiently, and try not to be uncharitable."

Agatha fell in with the suggestion. It was a relief to talk, and she had a certain respect, which she would not always admit, for her friend's shrewdness. She meant to go, but she desired to ascertain how a less interested person would regard the course that she had decided on.

"I have known Gregory since I was a girl," she said.

Winifred pursed up her lips. "I understood you met him at the Grange, and you were only there for a few weeks once a year," she replied. "After all, that isn't a very great deal. It seems he fell in love with you, which is, perhaps, comprehensible. What I don't quite know the reason for is why you fell in love with him."

"Ah," responded Agatha, "you have never seen Gregory."

"I haven't," admitted Winifred sourly; "I have, however, seen his picture. One must admit that he's reasonably good-looking. In fact, I've seen quite an assortment of photographs, but it's, perhaps, significant that the last was taken some years ago."

Agatha smiled. "Can a photograph show the clean, sanguine temperament of a man, his impulsive generosity, and cheerful optimism?"

Miss Rawlinson rose, and critically surveyed the photograph on the mantel.

"I don't want to be discouraging, but after studying that one I'm compelled to admit that it can't. No doubt it's the artist's fault, but I'm willing to admit that a young girl would be rather apt to credit a man with a face like that with qualities he didn't possess." She sat down again with a thoughtful expression. "The fact is, you set him up on a pedestal and burned incense to him when you were not old enough to know any better, and when he came home for a few weeks four years ago you promised to marry him. Now it seems he's ready at last, and wants you to go out to the new country. Perhaps it doesn't affect the question, but if I'd promised to marry a man in Canada he'd certainly have to come for me. Isn't there a certain risk in the thing?"

"A risk?"

Winifred nodded. "Yes," she said, "rather a serious one. Four years is a long time, and the man may have changed. In a new country where life is so different, it must be a thing they're rather apt to do."

A faint, half-compassionate, half-tolerant smile crept into Agatha's eyes. The mere idea that the sunny-tempered, brilliant young man to whom she had given her heart could have changed or degenerated in any way seemed absurd to her. Winifred, however, went on again.

"There's another point," she said. "If he's still the same, which isn't likely, there has certainly been a change in you. You have learned to see things more clearly, and have acquired a different standard from the one you had then. One can't help growing, and as one grows one looks for more. One is no longer pleased with the same things; it's inevitable."

She broke off for a moment, and her voice became gentler.

"Well," she added, "I've done my duty in trying to point this out to you, and now there's only another thing to say: since you're clearly bent on going, I'm going with you."

Agatha looked astonished, but there was a suggestion of relief in her expression, for the two had been firm friends and had faced a good deal together.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "that gets over the one difficulty!"

Winifred made a little whimsical gesture.

"I'm not quite sure that it does. The difficulty will probably be when I arrive in Canada, but I'm a rather capable person, and I believe they don't pay ninepence a thousand words in Winnipeg. Besides, I could keep the books at a store or a hotel, and at the very worst Gregory could, perhaps, find a husband for me. Women, I hear, are held in some estimation in that country. Perhaps there's a man out there who would treat decently even a little, plain, vixenish-tempered person with a turned-up nose."

Crossing the room again she banged the cover down on the typewriter, and then turned to Agatha with a suggestion of haziness in her eyes.

"Anyway, I'm very tired of this country. It would be intolerable when you went away."

Agatha stretched out a hand and drew the girl down beside her. She no longer feared adverse fortune and loneliness, and she was filled with a gentle compassion, for she knew how hard a fight Winifred had made, and part at least of what she had borne.

"My dear," she said, "we will go together."

Then she opened the second letter, which she had forgotten while they talked.

"They want me to stay at the Grange for a few weeks," she announced, and smiled. "An hour ago I felt crushed and beaten—and now, though my voice has probably gone for good, I don't seem to mind. Isn't it curious that both these letters should have come to sweep my troubles away to-night?"

"No," answered Winifred, "it's distinctly natural—just what one would have expected. You wrote to the man in Canada soon after you'd seen the specialist, and his answer was bound to arrive in the next few days."

"But I certainly didn't write the folks at the Grange."

Winifred's eyes twinkled. "As it happens, I did, two days ago. I ventured to point out their duty to them, and they were rather nice about it in another letter."

With a little sigh of contentment Agatha stretched herself out in the low chair. "Well," she said, "it probably wouldn't have the least effect if I scolded you. I believe I'm horribly worn out, Winny, and it will be a relief unspeakable to get away. If I can arrange to give up those pupils I'll go to-morrow."

Winifred made no answer. Kneeling with one elbow resting on the arm of Agatha's chair, she gazed straight in front of her. Both of the girls were very weary of the long, grim struggle, and now a change was close at hand.

CHAPTER V

THE OLD COUNTRY

It was a still, clear evening of spring when Wyllard, unstrapping the rücksack from his shoulders, sat down beside a frothing stream in a dale of Northern England. On his arrival in London a week or two earlier he had found awaiting him a letter from Mrs. Hastings, who was then in Paris, in which she said that she could not at the moment say when she would go home again, but that she expected to advise him shortly.

After answering the letter Wyllard started North, and, obtaining Agatha's address from Miss Rawlinson, went on again to a certain little town, which, encircled by towering fells, stands beside a lake in the North Country. He had already recognized that his mission was rather a delicate one, and he decided that it would be advisable to wait until he heard from Mrs. Hastings before calling upon Miss Ismay. There remained the question, what to do with the next few days. A conversation with several pedestrian tourists whom he met at his hotel, and a glance at a map of the hill-tracks decided him. Remembering that he had on several occasions kept the trail in Canada for close on forty miles, he bought a Swiss pattern rücksack, and set out on foot through the fells.

Incidentally, he saw scenery that gave him a new conception of the Old Country. He astonished his new friends, the tourists, who volunteered to show him the way over what they considered a difficult pass. To their great astonishment the brown-faced stranger, who wore ordinary tight-fitting American attire and rather pointed American shoes, went up the mountainside apparently without an effort, and for the credit of the clubs to which they belonged it was incumbent on them to keep pace with him. They did not know that he had carried bags of flour and mining tools over very much higher passes, close up to the limit of eternal snow, but they did know that he set them a difficult pace, and after two days' climbing they were relieved to part company with him.

A professional guide who overtook them recognized the capabilities of the man when he noticed the way in which he lifted his feet and how he set them down. This, the guide decided, was a man accustomed to walking among the heather, but he was wrong; for it was the trick the bushman learns when he plods through leagues of undergrowth and fallen branches, or the tall grass of the swamps; and it is a memorable experience to make a day's journey with such a man. For the first hour the thing seems easy, as the pace is never forced, but the speed never slackens; and as the hours go by the novice, who flounders and stumbles, grows horribly weary of trying to keep up with the steady, persistent swing.

Wyllard had traveled since morning along a ridge of fells when he sat down beside the water and contentedly filled his pipe. On the one hand, a wall of crags high above was growing black against the evening light, and the stream, clear as crystal, came boiling down among great boulders. But the young man had wandered through many a grander and more savage scene of rocky desolation, and it impressed him less than the green valley in front of him. He had never seen anything like that either on the Pacific slope or in Western Canada.

Early as it was in the season, the meadows between rock and water were green as emerald, and the hedge-rows, just flushed with verdure, were clipped and trimmed as if their owner loved them. There was not a dead tree in the larch copse which dipped to the stream, and all its feathery tassels were sprinkled with tiny flecks of crimson and wondrous green. Great oaks dotted the meadows, each one perfect in symmetry. It seemed that the men who held this land cared for single trees. The sleek, tame cattle that rubbed their necks on the level hedge-top and gazed at him ruminatively were very different from the wild, long-horned creatures whose furious stampede he had now and then headed off, riding hard while the roar of hoofs rang through the dust-cloud that floated like a sea fog across the sun-scorched prairie. Here, in the quiet vale, all was peace and tranquillity.

Wyllard noticed the pale primroses that pushed their yellow flowers up among the withered leaves, and he took account of the faint blue sheen beneath the beech trunks not far away. There was a vein of artistic feeling in him, and the elusive beauty of these things curiously appealed to him. He had seen the riotous, sensuous blaze of flowers kissed by Pacific breezes, and the burnished gold of wheat that rolled in mile-long waves; but it seemed to him that the wild things of the English North were, after all, more wonderful. They harmonized with the country's deep peacefulness; their beauty was chaste, fairy-like and ethereal.

By and by a wood pigeon cooed softly somewhere in the shadows, and a brown thrush perched on a bare oak bough began to sing. The broken, repeated melody went curiously well with the rippling murmur of sliding water, and Wyllard, though he could not remember ever having done anything of that sort before, leaned back with a smile to listen. His life had been a strenuous one, passed for the most part in the driving-seat of great plows that rent their ample furrows through virgin prairie, guiding the clinking binders through the wheat under a blazing sun, or driving the plunging dories through the clammy fog over short, slopping seas. Now, however, the tranquillity of the English valley stole in on him, and he began to understand how the love of that well-trimmed land clung to the men out West, who spoke of it tenderly as the "Old Country."

Then, for he was in an unusually susceptible mood, he took from his pocket a little deerhide case, artistically made by a Blackfoot Indian, and removed from it the faded photograph of an English girl. He had obtained the photograph from the lad who had died among the ranges of the Pacific slope, and it had been his companion in many a desolate camp and on many a weary journey. The face was delicately modeled, and there was a freshness in it which is seldom seen outside the Old Country; but what pleased him most was the serenity in the clear, innocent eyes.

He was not in love with the picture—he would probably have smiled at the notion—but he had a curious feeling that he would meet the girl some day, and that it would then be a privilege merely to speak to her. This was, after all, not so extravagant a fancy as it might appear, for romance, the mother of chivalry and many graces, still finds shelter in the hearts of men who dwell in the wide spaces of the newer lands. Shrewd and practical as these men are, they see visions now and then, and, what is more, with bleeding hands and toil incredible prove them to be realities.

By and by Wyllard put the photograph back into his pocket, and filled his pipe again. It was almost dark before he had smoked it out. The thrush had gone, and only the ripple of the water broke the silence, until he heard footsteps on the stones behind him. Looking around, he saw a young woman moving towards the river. He watched her with a quiet interest, for his perceptions were sharper than usual, and it seemed to him that she was very much in harmony with what he thought of as the key-tone of the place. She was tall and shapely, and she moved with grace. When, poised upon a shelf of rock as if considering the easiest way to the water, she stopped for a moment, her figure fell into reposeful lines, but that was after all only what he had expected, for he had half-consciously studied the Englishwomen whom he had met in the West.

The Western women usually moved, and certainly spoke, with an almost superfluous vivacity and alertness. There was in them a feverish activity, which contrasted with the English deliberation, which had sometimes exasperated him. Now he felt that this slowness of movement was born of the tranquillity of the well-trimmed land, and he realized that it would have troubled his sense of fitness if this girl had clattered down across the stones hurriedly and noisily.

At first he could not see her face, but when she went on a little further it became evident that she desired to cross the river, and was regarding the row of stepping stones somewhat dubiously. One or two had fallen over, or had been washed away by a flood, for there were several wide gaps between them, through which the stream frothed whitely. As soon as Wyllard noticed her hesitation, he rose and moved towards her.

"You want to get across?" he asked.

She was still glancing at the water, and although he was sure that she had not seen him or heard his approach, she turned towards him quietly. Then a momentary sense of astonishment held him in an embarrassed scrutiny, for it was her picture at which he had gazed scarcely half an hour before, and he would have recognized the face anywhere.

"Yes," she answered. "It is rather a long way around by the bridge, but some of the stones seem to have disappeared since I last came this way."

She spoke, as Wyllard had expected, softly and quietly. Because he was first of all a man of action, Wyllard forthwith waded into the river. Then he turned and held out his hand to her.

"It isn't a very long step. You ought to manage it," he said.

The girl favored him with a swift glance of uncertainty. At first she had supposed him to be one of the walking tourists or climbers who usually invaded the valleys at Easter; but they were, for the most part, young men from the cities, and this stranger's face was darkened by the sun. There was also an indefinite suggestion of strength in the poise of his lean, symmetrical figure, which could only have come from strenuous labor in the open air. She noticed that while the average Englishman would have asked permission to help her, or would have deprecated the offer, this stranger did nothing of the kind. He stood with the water frothing about his ankles, holding out his hand.

She had no hesitation about accepting Wyllard's aid, and, while he waded through the river, she stepped lightly from stone to stone until she came to a wide gap, where the stream was deep. She stopped a moment, gazing at the foaming water, until the man's hand tightened on her fingers, and she felt his other hand rest upon her waist.

"Now," he assured her, "I won't let you fall."

She was on the other side of the gap in another moment. Wondering uneasily why she had obeyed the compelling pressure, but glad to see that the stranger's face was perfectly unmoved, and that he was evidently quite unconscious of having done anything unusual, she crossed without mishap. When they stood on the shingle he dropped her hand.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm afraid you got rather wet."

The man laughed, and he had a pleasant laugh. "Oh," he replied, "I'm used to it." There was a little silence and he asked: "Isn't there a village with a hotel in it, a mile or two from here?"

"Yes," the girl answered, "this is the way. The path goes up to the highroad through the larch wood."

She turned into the path, and, though she had not expected him to accompany her, the man walked beside her. Still she did not resent it. His manner was deferential, and she liked his face, while there was, after all, no reason why he should stay behind when he was going the same way. He walked beside her silently for several minutes as they went on through the gloom of the larches, where a sweet, resinous odor crept into the still evening air, and then he looked up as they came to a towering pine.

"Have you many of those trees over here?" he asked.

A light dawned upon the girl, for, though he had spoken without a perceptible accent, she had been slightly puzzled by something in his speech and appearance.

"I believe they're not uncommon. You are an American?"

Wyllard laughed. "No," he replied. "I was born in Western Canada, but I think I'm as English as you are, in some respects, though I never quite realized it until to-night. It isn't exactly because my father came from this country, either."

The girl was astonished at this answer, and still more at the indefinite something in his manner which seemed to indicate that he expected her to understand, as, indeed, she did. Her only dowry had been an expensive education, and she remembered that the influence of the isle she lived in had in turn fastened on Saxons, Norsemen, Normans, and made them Englishmen. What was more, so far as she had read, those who had gone out South or Westwards had carried that influence with them, and, under all their surface changes, and sometimes their grievances against the Motherland, were, in the great essentials, wholly English still.

"But," she remarked at random, "how can you be sure that I'm English?"

It was quite dark in among the trees, but she fancied there was a smile in her companion's eyes.

"Oh," he answered simply, "you couldn't be anything else!"

She accepted this as a compliment, though she knew that it had not been his intention to flatter her. His general attitude since she had met him scarcely suggested such a lack of good taste. She was becoming mildly interested in the stranger, but she possessed several essentially English characteristics, and it did not appear advisable to encourage him too much. She said nothing further, and it was he who spoke first.

"I wonder," he said, "if you knew a young lad who went out to Canada a few years ago. His name was Pattinson—Henry Pattinson."

"No," the girl answered quickly. "I certainly did not. But the name is not an uncommon one. There are a good many Pattinsons in the North."

Wyllard was not surprised by this answer. He had reasons for believing that the name under which the lad he had befriended had enrolled himself was not the correct one. It would, of course, have been easy to describe the boy, but Wyllard was shrewd, and noticing that there was now a restraint in the girl's manner he could not speak prematurely. He was aware that most of the English are characterized by a certain reserve, and apt to retire into their shells if pressed too hard. He did not, however, mean to let this girl elude him altogether.

"It really doesn't matter," he responded. "I shall no doubt get upon his trail in due time."

They reached the highroad a minute or two later, and the girl turned to him.

"Thank you again," she said. "If you go straight on you will come to the village in about a quarter of an hour."

She turned away and left him standing with his soft hat in his hand. He stood quite still for almost a minute after she had gone. When he reached the inn its old-world simplicity delighted him. It was built with thick walls of slate, and roofed with ponderous flags. In Canada, where the frost was Arctic, they used thin cedar shingles. The room in which his meal was spread was paneled with oak that had turned black with age. Great rough-hewn beams of four times the size that anybody would have used for the purpose in the West supported the low ceiling. There was a fire in the wide hearth and the ruddy gleam of burnished copper utensils pierced the shadows. The room was large, but there was only a single candle upon the table. He liked the gloomy interior, and he felt that a garish light would somehow be out of harmony.

By and by his hostess appeared to clear the things away. She was a little, withered old woman, with shrewd, kindly eyes, and a russet tinge in her cheeks.

"There's a good light, and company in the sitting-room," she said. "We've three young men staying with us. They've been up the Pike."

"I'd sooner stay here, if I may," replied Wyllard. "I don't quite know yet if I'll go on to-morrow. One can get through to Langley Dale by the Hause, as I think you call it?"

The wrinkled dame said that pedestrians often went that way.

"There are some prosperous folks—people of station—living round here?" Wyllard asked casually.

"There's the vicar. I don't know that he's what you'd call prosperous. Then there's Mr. Martindale, of Rushyholme, and Little, of the Ghyll."

"Has any of them a daughter of about twenty-four years of age?" Wyllard described the girl he had met to the best of his ability.

It was evident that the landlady did not recognize the description, but she thought a moment.

"No," she answered, "there's nobody like that; but I did hear that they'd a young lady staying at the vicarage."

She changed the subject abruptly, and Wyllard once more decided that the English did not like questions.

"You're a stranger, sir?" she inquired.

"I am," said Wyllard. "I've some business to attend to further on, but I came along on foot, to see the fells, and I'm glad I did. It's a great and wonderful country you're living in. That is," he added gravely, "when you get outside the towns. There are things in some of the cities that most make one ill."

He stood up. "That tray's too heavy for you. Won't you let me carry it?"

The landlady was plainly amazed at his words, but she made it clear that she desired no assistance. When she went out Wyllard, who sat down again, took out the photograph. He gazed at it steadfastly.

"There's rather more than mere prettiness there, but I don't know that I want to keep it now," he reflected. "It's way behind the original. She has grown since it was taken—just as one would expect that girl to grow."

He lighted his pipe and smoked thoughtfully until he arrived at a decision.

"One can't force the running in this country. They don't like it," he said. "I'll lie by a day or two, and keep an eye on that vicarage."

In the meanwhile his hostess was discussing him with a niece.

"I'm sure I don't know what that man is," she informed the younger woman. "He has got the manners of a gentleman, but he walks like a fell shepherd, and his hands are like a navvy's. A man's hands now and then tell you a good deal about him. Besides, of all things, he wanted to carry his tray away. Said it was too heavy for me."

"Oh," replied her niece, "he's an American. There's no accounting for them."

CHAPTER VI

HER PICTURE

Wyllard stayed at the inn three days without seeing anything more of the girl whom he had met beside the stream, although he diligently watched for her. He had long felt it was his duty to communicate with the relatives of the lad that he had befriended, and the fact that he had found the girl's photograph in the young Englishman's possession made it appear highly probable that she could assist him in tracing the family. Apart from this, he could not quite analyze his motives for desiring to see more of the Englishwoman, though he was conscious of the desire. Her picture had been a companion to him in his wanderings, and now and then he had found a certain solace in gazing at it. Now that he had seen her in the flesh he was willing to admit that he had never met any woman who had made such an impression on him.

It was, of course, possible for him to call at the vicarage, but though he meant to adopt that course as a last resort, there were certain objections to it. He did not know the girl's name, and there was nobody to say a word for him. So far as his experience went, the English were apt to be reticent and reserved to a stranger. It seemed to him that, although the girl might give him the information which he required, their acquaintance probably would terminate then and there. She would, he decided, be less likely to stand upon her guard if he could contrive to meet her casually without prearrangement.

On the fourth day fortune favored him, for he came upon her endeavoring to open a tottering gate where a stony hill track led off from the smooth white road. As it happened, he had received a letter from Mrs. Hastings that morning, fixing the date of her departure, and it was necessary for him to discharge the duty with which Hawtrey had saddled him as soon as possible. The Grange, where he understood Miss Ismay was then staying, lay thirty miles away across the fells, and he had decided to start early on the morrow. That being the case, it was clear that he must make the most of this opportunity; but he realized that it would be advisable to proceed circumspectly. Saying nothing, he set his shoulder to the gate, and lifting it on its decrepit hinges swung it open.

"Thank you," said the girl. Remembering that the words were the last that she had said to him, she smiled, as she added: "It is the second time you have appeared when I was in difficulties."

In spite of his resolution to proceed cautiously, a twinkle crept into Wyllard's eyes, and suggested that the fact she had mentioned was not so much of a coincidence as it probably appeared. She saw the look that told her what he was thinking, and was about to pass on, when he stopped her with a gesture.

"The fact is, I have been looking out for you the last three days," he confessed.

He feared the girl had taken alarm at this candid statement, and spread his hands out deprecatingly. "Won't you hear me out?" he added. "There's a matter I must put before you, but I won't keep you long."

The girl was a little puzzled, and naturally curious. It struck her as strange that his admission should have aroused in her very little indignation; but she felt that it would be unreasonable to suspect this man of anything that savored of impertinence. His manner was reassuring, and she liked his face.

"Well?" she said inquiringly.

Wyllard waved his hand toward a big oak trunk that lay just inside the gate.

"If you'll sit down, I'll get through as quick as I can," he promised. "In the first place, I am, as I told you, a Canadian, who has come over partly to see the country, and partly to carry out one or two missions. In regard to one of them I believe you can help me."

The girl's face expressed a natural astonishment.

"I could help you?"

Wyllard nodded. "I'll explain my reasons for believing it later on," he said. "In the meanwhile, I asked you a question the other night, which I'll now try to make more explicit. Were you ever acquainted with a young Englishman who went to Canada from this country several years ago? He was about twenty then, and had dark hair and dark eyes. That, of course, isn't an unusual thing, but there was a rather curious white mark on his left temple. If he was ever a friend of yours, that scar ought to fix it."

"Oh!" cried the girl, "that must have been Lance Radcliffe. I was with him when the scar was made—ever so long ago. We heard that he was dead. But you said his name was Pattinson."

"I did," declared Wyllard gravely. "Still, I wasn't quite sure about the name being right. He's certainly dead. I buried him."

His companion made an abrupt movement, and he saw the sudden softening of her eyes. There was, however, only a gentle pity in her face, and nothing in her manner suggested the deeper feeling that he had half expected.

"Then," she said, "I am sure that his father would like to meet you. There was some trouble between them—I don't know which was wrong—and Lance went out to Canada, and never wrote. Major Radcliffe tried to trace him through a Vancouver banker, and only found that he had died in the hands of a stranger who had done all that was possible for him." She turned to Wyllard with a look which set his heart beating faster than usual. "You are that man?"

"Yes," said Wyllard simply, "I did what I could for him. It didn't amount to very much. He was too far gone."

Briefly he repeated the story that he had told to Hawtrey, and, when he had finished, her face was soft again, for what he said had stirred her curiously.

"But," she commented, "he had no claim on you."

Wyllard lifted one hand with a motion that disclaimed all right to commendation. "He was dying in the bush. Wasn't that enough?"

The girl made no answer for a moment or two. She had earned her living for several years, and she was to some extent acquainted with the grim realities of life. She did not know that while there are hard men in Canada the small farmers and ranchers of the West—and, perhaps above all, the fearless free lances who build railroads and grapple with giant trees in the forests of the Pacific slope—are, as a rule, distinguished by a splendid charity. With them the sick or worn-out stranger is seldom turned away. Watching the stranger covertly, she understood that this man whom she had seen for the first time three days before had done exactly what she would have expected of him.

"I saw a great deal of Lance Radcliffe—when I was younger," she said. "His people still live at Garside Scar, close by Dufton Holme. I presume you will call on them?"

Wyllard said that he purposed doing so, as he had a watch and one or two other mementos that they might like to have, and she told him how to reach Dufton Holme by a round-about railway journey.

"There is one point that rather puzzles me," she said, after she had made it plain how he was to find the Radcliffe family. "How did you know that I could tell you anything about him?"

Wyllard thrust his hand into his pocket, and took out a little leather case.

"You are by no means a stranger to me," he remarked as he handed her the photograph. "This is your picture; I found it among the dead lad's things."

The girl, who started visibly, flashed a keen glance at him. It was evident that he had not intended to produce any dramatic effect. She flushed a little.

"I never knew he had it," she asserted. "Perhaps he got it from his sister." She paused, and then, as if impelled to make the fact quite clear, added, "I certainly never gave it to him."

Wyllard smiled gravely, for he recognized that while she was clearly grieved to hear of young Radcliffe's death, she could have had no particular tenderness for the unfortunate lad.

"Well," he said, "perhaps he took it in the first place for the mere beauty of it, and it afterwards became a companion—something that connected him with the Old Country. It appealed in one of those ways to me."

Again she flashed a sharp glance at him, but he went on unheeding:

"When I found it I meant to keep it merely as a clew, and so that it could be given up to his relatives some day," he added. "Then I fell into the habit of looking at it in my lonely camp in the bush at night, and when I sat beside the stove while the snow lay deep upon the prairie. There was something in your eyes that seemed to encourage me."

"To encourage you?"

"Yes," Wyllard assented gravely, "I think that expresses it. When I camped in the bush of the Pacific slope we were either out on the gold trail—and we generally came back ragged and unsuccessful after spending several months' wages which we could badly spare—or I was going from one wooden town to another without a dollar in my pocket and wondering how I was to obtain one when I got there. For a time it wasn't much more cheerful on the prairie. Twice in succession the harvest failed. Perhaps Lance Radcliffe felt as I did."

The girl cut him short. "Why didn't you mention the photograph at once?"

Wyllard smiled at her. "Oh," he explained, "I didn't want to be precipitate—you English folk don't seem to like that. I think"—and he seemed to consider—"I wanted to make sure you wouldn't be repelled by what might look like Colonial *brusquerie*. You see, you have been over snow-barred divides and through great shadowy forests with me. We've camped among the boulders by lonely lakes, and gone down frothing rapids. I felt—I can't tell you why—that I was bound to meet you some day."

His frankness was startling, but the girl showed neither astonishment nor resentment. She felt certain that this stranger was not posing or speaking for effect. It did not occur to Wyllard that he might have gone too far, and for a moment or two he leaned against the gate, while she looked at him with what he thought of as her gracious English calm.

Pale sunshine fell upon them, though the larches beside the road were rustling beneath a cold wind, and the song of the river came up brokenly out of the valley. An odor of fresh grass floated about them, and the dry, cold smell of the English spring was in the air. Across the valley dim ghosts of hills lighted by evanescent gleams rose out of the east wind grayness with shadowy grandeur.

Then Wyllard aroused himself. "I wonder if I ought to write Major Radcliffe and tell him what my object is before I call," he said. "It would make the thing a little easier."

The girl rose. "Yes," she assented, "that would, perhaps, be wiser." She glanced at the photograph which was still in her hand. "It has served its purpose. I scarcely think it would be of any great interest to Major Radcliffe."

She saw his face change as she made it evident that she did not mean to give the portrait back to him. There was, at least, one excellent reason why she would not have her picture in a strange man's hands.

"Thank you," she said, "for the story. I am glad we have met; but I'm afraid I have already kept my friends waiting for me."

She turned away, and it occurred to Wyllard that he had made a very indifferent use of the opportunity, since she had neither asked his name nor told him hers. It was, however, evident that he could not well run after her and demand her name, and he decided that he could in all probability obtain it from Major Radcliffe. Still, he regretted his lack of adroitness as he walked back to the inn, where he wrote two letters when he had consulted a map and his landlady. Dufton Holme, he discovered, was a small village within a mile or two of the Grange where, as Miss Rawlinson had informed him, Agatha Ismay was then staying. One letter was addressed to her, and he formally asked permission to call upon her with a message from George Hawtrey. The other was to Major Radcliffe, and in both he said that an answer would reach him at the inn which his landlady had informed him was to be found not far from both of the houses he intended to visit.

He set out on foot next morning, and, after climbing a steep pass, followed a winding track across a waste of empty moor until he struck a smooth white road, which led past a rock-girt lake and into a deep valley. It was six o'clock in the morning when he started, and three in the afternoon when he reached the inn, where he found an answer to one of the letters awaiting him. It was from Major Radcliffe, who desired an interview with him as soon as possible.

Within an hour he was on his way to the Major's house, where a gray-haired man, whose yellow skin suggested long exposure to a tropical sun, and a little withered lady were waiting for him. They received him graciously, but there was an indefinite something in their manner and bearing which Wyllard, who had read a great deal, recognized, though he had never been brought into actual contact with it until then. He felt that he could not have expected to come across such people anywhere but in England, unless it was at the headquarters of a British battalion in India.

He told his story tersely, softening unpleasant details and making little of what he had done. The gray-haired man listened gravely with an unmoved face, though a trace of moisture crept into the little lady's eyes. There was silence for a moment or two when he had finished, and then Major Radcliffe, whose manner was very quiet, turned to him.

"You have laid me under an obligation, which I could never wipe out, even if I wished it," he said. "It was my only son you buried out there in Canada."

He broke off for a moment, and his quietness was more marked than ever when he went on again.

"As you have no doubt surmised, we quarreled," he said. "He was extravagant and careless—at least I thought that then—but now it seems to me that I was unduly hard on him. His mother"—and he turned to the little lady with an inclination that pleased Wyllard curiously—"was sure of it at the time. In any case, I took the wrong way, and he went out to Canada. I made that, at least, easy for him—and I have been sorry ever since."

He paused again with a little expressive gesture. "It seems due to him, and you, that I should tell you this. When no word reached us I had inquiries made, through a banker, who, discovering that he had registered at a hotel as Pattinson, at length traced him to a British Columbian silver mine. He had, however, left the mine shortly before my correspondent learned that he had been employed there, and all that the banker could tell me was that an unknown prospector had nursed my boy until he died."

Wyllard took out a watch and the clasp of a workman's belt from his pocket, and laid them gently on Mrs. Radcliffe's knee. He saw her eyes fill, and turned his head away.

"I feel that you may blame me for not writing sooner, but it was only a very little while ago that I was able to trace you, and then it was only by a very curious—coincidence," he explained presently.

He did not consider it advisable to mention the photograph. It seemed to him that the girl would not like it. Nor, though he was greatly tempted, did he care to make inquiries concerning her just then. In another moment or two the Major spoke again.

"If I can make your stay here pleasanter in any way I should be delighted," he said. "If you will take up your quarters with us I will send down to the inn for your things."

Wyllard excused himself, but when Mr. Radcliffe urged him to dine with them on the following evening he hesitated.

"The one difficulty is that I don't know yet whether I shall be engaged then," he said. "As it happens, I've a message for Miss Ismay, and I wrote offering to call upon her at any convenient hour. So far, I have heard nothing from her."

"She's away," Mrs. Radcliffe informed him. "They have probably sent your letter on to her. I had a note from her yesterday, however, and expect her here to-morrow. You have met some friends of hers in Canada?"

"Gregory Hawtrey," said Wyllard. "I have promised to call upon his people, too."

He saw Major Radcliffe glance at his wife, and he noticed a faint gleam in Mrs. Radcliffe's eyes.

"Well," she observed, "if you promise to come I will send word over to Agatha."

Wyllard agreed to this, and went away a few minutes later. He noticed the tact and consideration with which his new friends had refrained from indicating any sign of the curiosity they naturally felt, for Mrs. Radcliffe's face had suggested that she understood the situation, which was beginning to appear a little more difficult to him. It was, it seemed, his task to explain delicately to a girl brought up among such people what she must be prepared to face as a farmer's wife in Western Canada. He was not sure that this task would be easy in itself, but it was rendered much more difficult by the fact that Hawtrey would expect him to accomplish it without unduly daunting her. Her letter certainly had suggested courage, but, after all, it was the courage of ignorance, and he had now some notion of the life of ease and refinement her English friends enjoyed. He was beginning to feel sorry for Agatha Ismay.

CHAPTER VII

AGATHA DOES NOT FLINCH

THE next evening Wyllard sat with Mrs. Radcliffe in a big low-ceilinged room at Garside Scar. He looked about him with quiet interest. He had now and then passed a day or two in huge Western hotels, but he had never seen anything quite like that room. The sheer physical comfort of its arrangements appealed to him, but after all he was not one who had ever studied his bodily ease very much, and what he regarded as the chaste refinement of its adornment had a deeper effect than a mere appeal to the material side of his nature. Though he had lived for the most part in the bush and on the prairie, he had somehow acquired an artistic susceptibility.

The furniture was old, and perhaps a trifle shabby, but it was of beautiful design. Curtains, carpets and tinted walls formed a harmony of soft coloring, and there were scattered here and there dainty works of art, little statuettes from Italy, and wonderful Indian ivory and silver work. A row of low, stone-ribbed windows pierced the front of the room. Looking out he saw the trim garden lying in the warm evening light. Immediately beneath the windows ran a broad graveled terrace, which was evidently raked smooth every day, and a row of urns in which hyacinths bloomed stood upon its pillared wall. From the middle of the terrace a wide stairway led down to the wonderful velvet lawn, which was dotted with clumps of cupressus with golden gleams in it, and beyond the lawn clipped yews rose smooth and solid as a rampart of stone.

It all impressed him curiously—the order and beauty of it, the signs of loving care. It gave him a key, he fancied, to the lives of the cultured English people, for there was no sign of strain and fret and stress and hurry here. Everything, it seemed, went smoothly with rhythmic regularity, and though it is possible that many Englishmen would have regarded Garside Scar as a very second-rate country house, and would have seen in Major Radcliffe and his wife nothing more than a somewhat prosy old soldier and a withered lady old-fashioned in her dress and views, this Westerner had what was, perhaps, a clearer vision. Wyllard could imagine the Major standing fast at any cost upon some minute point of honor, and it seemed to him that Mrs. Radcliffe, with all the graces of an earlier age and the smell of the English lavender upon her garments, might have stepped down from some old picture. Then he remembered that, after all, Englishwomen lived somewhat coarsely in the Georgian days, and that he had met in Western Canada hard-handed men grimed with dust and sweat who also could stand fast by a point of honor. Though the fact did not occur to him, he had, for that matter, done it more than once himself.

He recalled his wandering thoughts as his hostess smiled at him.

"You are interested in all you see?" she asked frankly.

"Yes," said Wyllard. "In fact, I'd like to spend some hours here and look at everything. I'd begin at the pictures and work right around."

Mrs. Radcliffe's smile suggested that she was not displeased.

"But you have been in London?"

"I have," said Wyllard. "I had one or two letters to persons there, and they did all they could to entertain me. Still, their places were different; they hadn't the—charm—of yours. It's something which I think could exist only in these still valleys and in cathedral closes. It strikes me more because it is something I've never been accustomed to."

Mrs. Radcliffe was interested, and fancied that she partly understood his attitude.

"Your life is necessarily different from ours," she suggested.

Wyllard smiled. "It's so different that you couldn't realize it. It's all strain and effort from early sunrise until after dusk at night. Bodily strain of aching muscles, and mental stress in adverse seasons. We scarcely think of comfort, and never dream of artistic luxury. The money we make is sunk again in seed and extra teams and plows."

"After all, a good many people are driven rather hard by the love of money here."

"No," Wyllard rejoined gravely, "that's not it exactly. At least, not with the most of us. It's rather the pride of wresting another quarter-section from the prairie, taking—our own—by labor, breaking the wilderness. You"—and he added this as if to explain that he could hardly expect her quite to grasp his views—"have never been out West?"

His hostess laughed. "I have stayed down in the plains through the hot season in stifling cantonments, and have once or twice been in Indian cholera camps. Besides, I have seen my husband sitting, haggard and worn with fever, in his saddle holding back a clamorous crowd that surged about him half-mad with religious fury. There were Hindus and Moslems to be kept from flying at each other's throats, and at a tactless word or sign of wavering, either party would have pulled him down."

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"You'll have to forgive me"—Wyllard's gesture was deprecatory, though his eyes twinkled. "The notion that we're the only ones who really work, or, at least, do anything worth while, is rather a favorite one out West. No doubt it's a delusion. I should have known that all of us are born like that."

Mrs. Radcliffe forgave him readily, if only for the "all of us," which struck her as especially fortunate. A few minutes later there were voices in the hall, and then the door opened, and the girl whom he had met at the stepping stones came in. She was dressed in trailing garments which became her wonderfully, and he noticed now the shapely delicacy of her hands and the fine, ivory pallor of her skin. Mrs. Radcliffe turned to him.

"I had better present you formally to Miss Ismay," she said. "Agatha, this is Mr. Wyllard, who I understand has brought you a message from Canada."

There was no doubt that Wyllard was blankly astonished, and for a moment the girl was clearly startled, too.

"You!" was all she said.

She held out her hand before she turned to speak to Mrs. Radcliffe. It was a relief to both when dinner was announced.

Wyllard sat next to his hostess, and was not sorry that he was called upon to take part only in casual general conversation. He thought once or twice that Miss Ismay was unobtrusively studying him. It was nearly an hour after the dinner when Mrs. Radcliffe left them alone in the drawing-room.

"You have, no doubt, a good deal to talk about, and you needn't join us until you're ready," she said. "The Major always reads the London papers after dinner."

Agatha sat in a low chair near the hearth, and it occurred to Wyllard, who took a place opposite her, that she was too delicate and dainty, too over-cultivated, in fact, to marry Hawtrey. This was rather curious, since he had hitherto regarded his comrade as a typical well-educated Englishman; but it now seemed to him that there was a certain streak of coarseness in Gregory. The man, it suddenly flashed upon him, was self-indulgent, and the careless ease of manner, which he had once liked, was too much in evidence.

Agatha turned to him.

"I understand that Gregory is recovering rapidly?" she said.

Wyllard assured her that Hawtrey was convalescing, and Agatha said quietly, "He wants me to go out to him."

Wyllard felt that if a girl of that sort had promised to marry him he would not have sent for her, but would have come in person, if he had been compelled to pledge his last possessions, or crawl to the tideway on his hands and knees. For all that he was ready to defend his friend.

"I'm afraid it's necessary," he said. "Gregory was quite unfit for such a journey when I left, and he must be ready to commence the season's campaign with the first of the spring. Our summer is short, you see, and with our one-crop farming it's indispensable to get the seed in early. In fact, he will be badly behind as it is."

This was not particularly tactful, since, without intending it, he made it evident that he felt his comrade had been to some extent remiss; but Agatha smiled.

"Oh," she replied, "I understand! You needn't labor with excuses. But doesn't the same thing apply to you?"

"It certainly did. Now, however, things have become a little easier. My holding is larger than Gregory's, and I have a foreman who can look after it for me."

"Gregory said that you were a great friend of his."

Wyllard seized this opportunity. "He was a great friend of mine, and I like to think it means the same thing. In fact, it's reasonably certain that he saved my life for me."

"Ah!" exclaimed Agatha; "that is a thing he didn't mention. How did it come about?"

Wyllard was glad to tell the story. He was anxious to say all he honestly could in Hawtrey's favor.

"We were at work on a railroad trestle—a towering wooden bridge, in British Columbia. It stretched across a deep ravine with great boulders and there was a stream in the bottom of it. He stood high up on a staging close beneath the rails. A fast freight, a huge general produce train, came down the track, with one of the new big locomotives hauling it, and when the cars went banging by above us we could hardly hold on to the bridge. The construction foreman was a hustler, and we had to get the spikes in. I was swinging the hammer when I felt the plank beneath me slip. The train, it seems, had jarred loose the bolt around which we had our lashings. For a moment I felt that I was going down into the gorge, and then Gregory leaned out and grabbed me. He had only one free hand to do it with, and when he felt my weight one foot swung out from the stringer he had sprung to. It seemed certain that I would pull him with me, too. We hung like that for a space—I don't quite know how long."

He paused for a moment, apparently feeling the stress of it again, and there was a faint thrill in his voice when he went on.

"It was then," he said, "I knew just what kind of man Gregory Hawtrey was. Anybody else would have let me go; but he held on. I got my hand on some of the framing, and he swung me on to the stringer."

He saw the gleam in Agatha's eyes. "Oh!" she cried, "that is just what he must have done. He was like that always—impulsive, splendidly generous."

Wyllard felt that he had succeeded, though he knew that there were men on the prairie who called his comrade slackly careless, instead of impulsive. Agatha spoke again.

"But Gregory wasn't a carpenter," she said.

"In those days when money was scarce we had to be whatever we could. There wasn't much specialization of handicrafts out there then. The farmer whose crop was ruined took up the railroad shovel, or borrowed a saw from somebody and set about building houses, or anything else that was wanted."

"Of course!" replied Agatha. "Besides, he was always wonderfully quick. He could learn any game by just watching it a while. He did all he undertook brilliantly."

It occurred to Wyllard that Gregory had, at least, made no great success of farming; but that occupation, as practiced on the prairie, demands a great deal more than quickness and what some call brilliancy from the man who undertakes it. He must, as they say out there, possess the capacity for staying with it—the grim courage to hold fast the tighter under each crushing blow, when the grain shrivels under the harvest frost, or when the ragged ice hurtling before a roaring blast does the reaping. It was, however, evident that this girl had an unquestioning faith in Gregory Hawtrey, and once more Wyllard felt compassionate towards her. He wondered if she would have retained her confidence had Hawtrey spent those four years in England instead of Canada, for it was clear from the contrast between her and her picture that she had grown in many ways since she had given her promise to her lover. He had said what he could in Hawtrey's favor, but now he felt that something was due to the girl.

"Gregory told me to explain what things are like out there," he said. "I think it is because they are so different from what you are accustomed to that he has waited so long. He wanted to make them as easy as possible for you, and now he would like you to realize what is before you."

He was surprised at the girl's quick comprehension, for she glanced around the luxurious room with a faint smile.

"You look on me as part of—this? I mean it seems to you that I fit in with my surroundings, and would be in harmony only with them?"

"Yes," answered Wyllard gravely, "I think you fit in with them excellently."

Agatha laughed. "Well," she said, "I was once, to a certain extent, accustomed to something similar; though, after all, one could hardly compare the Grange with Garside Scar. Still, that was some time ago, and I have earned my living for several years now. That counts for something, doesn't it?"

She glanced down at her dress. "For instance, this is the result of a great deal of self-denial, though the cost of it was partly worked off in music lessons, and the stuff was almost the cheapest I could get. I sang at concerts—and it was part of my stock in trade. After all, why should you think me capable only of living in luxury?"

"I didn't go quite that far."

She laughed again. "Then is Canada such a very dreadful place? I have heard of other Englishwomen going out there as farmers' wives. Do they all live unhappily?"

"No," replied Wyllard, "at least, they show no sign of it, and some of them and the city-born Canadians are, I think, the salt of this earth. Probably it's easy to be calm and gracious in such a place as this—though naturally I don't know since I've never tried it—but when a woman who toils from sunrise to sunset most of the year keeps her sweetness and serenity, it's a very different and much finer thing. But I'll try to answer the other question. The prairie isn't dreadful; it's a land of sunshine and clear skies. Heat and cold—and we have them both—don't worry one there. There's optimism in the crystal air. It's not beautiful like these valleys, but it has its beauty. It is vast and silent, and, though our homesteads are crude and new, once you pass the breaking, it's primevally old. That gets hold of one somehow. It's wonderful after sunset in the early spring, when the little cold wind is like wine, and it runs white to the horizon with the smoky red on the rim of it melting into transcendental green. When the wheat rolls across the foreground in ocher and burnished copper waves, it is more wonderful still. One sees the fulfillment of the promise, and takes courage."

"Then," asked Agatha, who had scarcely suspected him of such appreciation of nature, "what is there to shrink from?"

"In the case of a small farmer's wife, the constant, never-slackening strain. There's no hired assistance. She must clean the house, and wash, and cook, though it's not unusual for the men to wash the plates."

The girl evidently was not much impressed, for she laughed.

"Does Gregory wash the plates?" she asked.

Wyllard's eyes twinkled. "When Sproatly won't," he said. "Still, in a general way they do it only once a week."

"Ah," observed Agatha, "I can imagine Gregory hating it. As a matter of fact, I like him for it."

"Then the farmer's wife must bake, and mend her husband's clothes. Indeed, it's not unusual for her to mend for the hired man, too. Besides that, there are always odds and ends of tasks, but the time when you feel the strain most is in the winter. Then you sit at night, shivering, as a rule, beside the stove in an almost empty log-walled room, reading a book you have probably read three or four times before. Outside, the frost is Arctic; you can hear the roofing shingles crackle now and then; and you wake up when the fire burns low. There's no life, no company, rarely a new face, and if you go to a dance or a supper somewhere, perhaps once a month, you ride back on a bob-sled and are frozen almost stiff beneath the robes."

"Still," interposed Agatha, "that does not last."

The man understood her. "Oh!" he said, "one makes progress—that is, if one can stand the strain—but, as the one way of doing it is to sow for a larger harvest and break fresh sod every year, there can be no slackening in the meanwhile. Every dollar must be guarded and plowed into the soil again."

He broke off, feeling that he had done all that could reasonably be expected of him, and Agatha asked one question.

"A woman who didn't slacken could make the struggle easier for the man, couldn't she?"

"Yes," Wyllard assured her, "in every way. Still, she would have a great deal to bear."

Agatha's face softened. "Ah," she commented, "she would not grudge the effort in the case of one she loved."

She looked up again with a smile. "I wonder," she added, "if you really thought I should flinch."

"When I first heard of it, I thought it quite likely. Then when I read your letter my doubts vanished."

He saw that he had not been judicious, for there was, for the first time, a trace of hardness in the girl's expression.

"He showed you that?" she asked.

"One small part of it," assured Wyllard. "I want to say that when I first saw this house, and how you seemed fitted to it, my misgivings about Gregory's decision troubled me once more. Now,"—and he made an impressive gesture—"they have vanished altogether, and they'll never come back again."

He spoke as he felt. This girl, he knew, would feel the strain; but it seemed to him that she had strength enough to bear it cheerfully. In spite of her daintiness, she was one who, in time of stress, could be depended on. He often remembered afterwards how they had sat together in the luxuriously furnished room, she leaning back in her big, low chair, with the soft light on her delicately tinted face. By and by he looked at her.

"It's curious that I had your photograph ever so long, and never thought of showing it to Gregory," he observed.

Agatha smiled. "I suppose it is," she admitted. "After all, except that it might have been a relief to Major Radcliffe if he had met you sooner, the fact that you didn't show it to Gregory doesn't seem of any particular consequence."

Wyllard was not quite sure of this. He had thought about this girl often, and certainly had been conscious of a curious thrill of satisfaction when he had met her at the stepping-stones. That feeling had suddenly disappeared when he had learned that she was his comrade's promised wife. He had, however, during the last hour or two made up his mind to think no more of her.

"Well," he declared, "the next thing is to arrange for Mrs. Hastings to meet you in London, or, perhaps, at the Grange. Her husband is a Canadian, a man of education, who has quite a large homestead not far from Gregory's. Her relatives are people of station in Montreal, and I feel sure that you'll like her."

They decided that he was to ask Mrs. Hastings to stay a few days at the Grange, and then he looked at the girl somewhat diffidently.

"She suggests going in a fortnight," he said.

Agatha smiled at him. "Then," she said, "I must not keep her waiting."

She rose and they went back together to join their hostess.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TRAVELING COMPANION

A GRAY haze, thickened by the smoke of the city, drove out across the water when the *Scarrowmania* lay in the Mersey, with her cable hove short, and the last of the flood-tide gurgling against her bows. A trumpeting blast of steam swept high aloft from beside her squat funnel, and the splash of the slowly turning paddles of the two steam tugs that lay alongside mingled with the din it made. A gangway from one of them to the *Scarrowmania's* forward deck, and a stream of frowsy humanity that had just been released from overpacked emigrant boarding-houses poured up it. There were apparently representatives of all peoples and languages among that unkempt horde—Britons, Scandinavians, Teutons, Italians, Russians, Poles—and they moved on in forlorn apathy, like cattle driven to the slaughter. One wondered how they had raised their passage money, and how many years' bitter self-denial it had cost them to provide for their transit to the land of promise.

At the head of the gangway stood the steamboat doctors, for the *Scarrowmania* was taking out an unusual number of passengers, and there were two of them. They were immaculate in blue uniform, and looked very clean and English by contrast with the mass of frowsy aliens. Beside them stood another official, presumably acting on behalf of the Dominion Government, though there were few restrictions imposed upon Canadian immigration then, nor, for that matter, did anybody trouble much about the comfort of the steerage passengers. Each steamer carried as many as she could hold.

As the stream poured out of the gangway, the doctor glanced at each newcomer's face, and then seizing him by the wrist uncovered it. Then he looked at the official, who made a sign, and the man moved on. Since this took him two or three seconds, one could have fancied that he either possessed peculiar powers, or that the test was a somewhat inefficient one.

A group of first-class passengers, leaning on the thwartship rails close by, looked on, with complacent satisfaction or half-contemptuous pity. Among them stood Mrs. Hastings, Miss Winifred Rawlinson, and Agatha. It was noticed that Wyllard, with a pipe in his hand, sat on a hatch forward, near the head of the gangway. Agatha drew Mrs. Hastings' attention to it.

"Whatever is Mr. Wyllard doing there?" she asked.

Mrs. Hastings, who was wrapped in furs, to protect her from the sting in the east wind, smiled at her.

"That," she answered, "is more than I can tell you; but Harry Wyllard seems to find an interest in what other folks would consider most unpromising things, and, what is more to the purpose, he is rather addicted to taking a hand in them. It is a habit that costs him something now and then."

Agatha asked nothing further. She was interested in Wyllard, but she was at the moment more interested in the faces of those who swarmed on board. She wondered what the emigrants had endured in the lands that had cast them out; and what they might still have to bear. It seemed to her that the murmur of their harsh voices went up in a great protest, an inarticulate cry of sorrow. While she looked on the doctor held back a long-haired man who, shuffling in broken boots, was following a haggard woman. The physician drew him aside, and after he had consulted with the other official, two seamen hustled the man towards a second gangway that led to the tug. The woman raised a wild, despairing cry. She blocked the passage, and a quarter-master drove her, expostulating in an agony of terror, forward among the rest. Nobody appeared concerned about this alien's tragedy, except one man, and Agatha was not surprised when Wyllard rose and quietly laid his hand upon the official's shoulder.

A parley appeared to follow, somebody gave an order, and when the alien was led back again the woman's cries subsided. Agatha looked at Mrs. Hastings and once more a smile crept into the older woman's eyes.

"Yes," said Mrs. Hastings, "I guessed he would feel that he had to interfere. That is a man who can't see any one in trouble." She added, with a little whimsical sigh, "He had a bonanza harvest last fall, anyway."

They moved aft soon afterwards, and the *Scarrowmania* was smoothly sliding seawards with the first of the ebb when Agatha met Wyllard. He glanced at the Lancashire sandhills, which were fading into a pale ocher gleam amid the haze over the starboard hand, and then at the long row of painted buoys that moved back to them.

"You're off at last! The sad gray weather is dropping fast astern," he said. "Out yonder, the skies are clear."

"Thank you," replied Agatha, "I'm to apply that as I like? As a matter of fact, however, our days weren't always gray. But what was the trouble when those steerage people came on board?"

Wyllard's manner, she noticed, was free alike from the complacent self-satisfaction which occasionally characterizes the philanthropist, and from any affectation of diffidence.

"Well," he answered, "there was something wrong with that woman's husband. Nothing infectious, I believe, but they didn't seem to consider him a desirable citizen. They make a warning example of somebody with a physical infirmity now and then. The man, they decided, must be put ashore again. In the meanwhile, somebody else had hustled the woman forward, and it looked as if they would take her on without him. The tug was almost ready to cast off."

"How dreadful!" said Agatha. "But what did you do?"

"Merely promised to guarantee the cost of his passage back if they would refer his case to the immigration people at the other end. It is scarcely likely that they'll make trouble. As a rule, they only throw out folks who are certain to become a charge on the community."

"But if he really had any infirmity, mightn't it lead to that?"

"No," Wyllard responded dryly. "I would engage to give him a fair start if it was necessary. You wouldn't have had that woman landed in Montreal, helpless and alone, while the man was sent back again to starve in Poland?"

He saw a curious gleam in Agatha's eyes, and added in a deprecating manner, "You see, I've now and then limped without a dollar into a British Columbian mining town."

The girl was touched with compassion, but there was another matter that must be mentioned, though she felt that the time was inopportune.

"Miss Rawlinson, who had only a second-class ticket, insists upon being told how it is that she has been transferred to the saloon."

Wyllard's eyes twinkled, but she noticed that he was wholly free from embarrassment, which was not quite the case with her.

"Well," he said, "that's a matter I must leave you to handle. Anyway, she can't go second-class now. One or two of the steerage exchanged when they saw their quarters, for which I don't blame them, and they have filled up every room."

"You haven't answered the question."

Wyllard waved his hand. "Miss Rawlinson is your bridesmaid, and I'm Gregory's best man. It seems to me it's my business to do everything just as he would like it done."

He left her a moment later, and, though she did not know how she was to explain the matter to Miss Rawlinson, who was of an independent nature, it occurred to her that he, at least, had found a rather graceful way out of the difficulty. The more she saw of this Western farmer, the more she liked him.

It was after dinner when she next met him and the wind had changed. The *Scarrowmania* was steaming head-on into a glorious northwest breeze. The shrouds sang; chain-guy, and stanchion, and whatever caught the wind, set up a deep-toned throbbing; and ahead ranks of little, white-topped seas rolled out of the night. A half-moon, blurred now and then by wisps of flying cloud, hung low above them, and odd spouts of spray that gleamed in the silvery light leaped up about the dipping bows. Wyllard was leaning on the rail when Agatha stopped beside him. She glanced towards the lighted windows of the smoking-room not far away.

"How is it you are not in there?" she asked, noticing that he held a cigar in his hand.

"I was," answered Wyllard. "It's rather full, and it seemed that they didn't want me. They're busy playing cards, and the stakes are rather high. In a general way, a steamboat's smoking-room is less of a men's lounge than a gambling club."

"And you object to cards?"

"Oh, no!" Wyllard replied with a smile. "They merely make me tired, and when I feel I want some excitement for my money I get it another way. That one seems tame to me."

"What sort of excitement do you like?"

The man laughed. "There are a good many that appeal to me. Once it was collecting sealskins off other people's beaches, and there was zest enough in that, in view of the probability of the dory turning over, or a gunboat dropping on to you. Then there was a good deal of very genuine excitement to be got out of placer-mining in British Columbia, especially when there was frost in the ranges, and you had to thaw out your giant-powder. Shallow alluvial workings have a way of caving in when you least expect it of them. After all, however, I think I like the prairie farming best."

"Is that exciting?"

"Yes," returned Wyllard, "if you do it in one way. The gold's there—that you're sure of—piled up by nature during I don't know how many thousand years, but you have to stake high, if you want to get much of it out. One needs costly labor, teams—no end of them—breakers, and big gang-plows. The farmer who has nerve enough drills his last dollar into the soil in spring, but if he means to succeed it costs him more than that. He must give the sweat of his tensest effort, the uttermost toil of his body—all, in fact, that has been given him. Then he must shut his eyes tight to the hazards against him, or look at them without wavering—the drought, the hail, the harvest frost, I mean. If his teams fall sick, or the season goes against him, he must work double tides. Still, it now and then happens that things go right, and the red wheat rolls ripe right back across the prairie. I don't know that any man could want a keener thrill than the one he feels when he drives in the binders!"

Agatha had imagination, and she could realize something of the toil, the hazard, and the exultation of that victory.

"You have felt it often?" she inquired.

"Twice we helped to fill a big elevator," Wyllard answered. "But I've been very near defeat."

The girl looked at him thoughtfully. It seemed that he possessed the power of acquisition, as well as a wide generosity that came into play when by strenuous effort success had been attained. So far as her experience went, these were things that did not invariably accompany each other.

"And when the harvest comes up to your expectations, you give your money away?" she asked with a lifting of her brows.

Wyllard laughed. "You shouldn't deduce too much from a single instance. Besides, that Pole's case hasn't cost me anything yet."

Mrs. Hastings joined them, and when Wyllard strolled away the women passed some time leaning on the rails, and looking at the groups of shadowy figures on the forward deck. The attitude of the steerage passengers was dejected and melancholy, but one cluster had gathered around a man who stood upon the hatch.

"Oh," he declared, "you'll have no trouble. Canada's a great country for a poor man. He can sleep beneath a bush all summer, if he can't strike anything he likes."

This did not appear particularly encouraging, but the orator went on: "Been over for a trip to the Old Country, and I'm glad I'm going back again. Went out with nothing except a good discharge, and they made me Sergeant of Canadian Militia. After that I was armorer to a rifle club. There's places a blame long way behind the Dominion, and I struck one of them when we went with Roberts to Afghanistan. It was on that trip I and a Pathan rolled all down a hill, him trying to get his knife arm loose, and me jabbing his breastbone with my bayonet before I got it into him. I drove it through to the socket. You want to make quite sure of a Pathan."

Miss Rawlinson winced at this. "Oh," she cried, "what a horrible man!"

"It was 'most as tough as when you went after Riel, and stole the Scotchman's furs," suggested a Canadian.

The sergeant let the jibe go by. He said: "Louis's bucks could shoot! We had them corraled in a pit, and every time one of the boys from Montreal broke cover he got a bullet into him. Did any of you ever hear a dropped man squeal?"

Agatha had heard sufficient, and she and her companions turned away, but as they moved across the deck the sergeant's voice followed her.

"Oh, yes," he said, "a grand country for a poor man. In the summer he can sleep beneath a bush."

For some reason this eulogy haunted Agatha when she retired to her stateroom that night, and she wondered what awaited all those aliens in the new land. It occurred to her that in some respects she was situated very much as they were. For the first time, vague misgivings crept into her mind as she realized that she had cut herself adrift from all to which she had been accustomed. She felt suddenly depressed and lonely.

The depression had, however, almost vanished when, awakening rather early next morning, she went up on deck.

A red sun hung over the tumbling seas that ran into the hazy east astern. The waves rolled up in crested phalanxes that gleamed green and incandescent white ahead. The *Scarrowmania* plunged through them with a spray cloud flying about her dipping bows. She was a small, old-fashioned boat, and because she carried 3,000 tons of railway iron she rolled distressfully. Her tall spars swayed athwart the vivid blueness of the morning sky with the rhythmic regularity of a pendulum. The girl was not troubled by any sense of sea-sickness. The keen northwester that sang amid the shrouds was wonderfully fresh; and, when she met Wyllard crossing the saloon deck, her cheeks were glowing from the sting of the spray, and her eyes were bright.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Down there," answered Wyllard, pointing to the black opening in the fore-hatch that led to the steerage quarters. "An acquaintance of mine who's traveling forward asked me to take a look round, and I'm rather glad I did. When I've had a word with the chief steward I'm going back again."

"You have a friend down there?"

"I met the man for the first time yesterday, and rather took to him. One of your naval petty officers, forcibly retired. He can't live upon his pension, that is why he's going out to Canada. Now you'll excuse me."

"I wonder," ventured Agatha, "if you would let me go back with you?"

Wyllard looked at her curiously. "Well," he said, with an air of reflection, "you'll probably have to face a good deal that you don't like out yonder, and in one way you won't suffer from a little preparatory training. This, however, is not a case where sentimental pity is likely to relieve anybody. It's the real thing."

"I think I told you at Garside Scar that I haven't lived altogether in luxury!" she replied.

Wyllard, who made no comment, disappeared, and merely signed to her when he came back. They reached the ladder that led down into the gloom beneath the hatch, and Agatha hesitated when a sour and musty odor floated up to her. She went down, however, and a few moments later stood, half-nauseated, gazing at the wildest scene of confusion her eyes had ever rested on. A little light came down the hatchway, and a smoky lamp or two swung above her head, but half the steerage deck was wrapped in shadow, and out of it there rose a many-voiced complaining. Flimsy, unplaned fittings had wrenched away, and men lay inert amid the wreckage, with the remains of their last meal scattered about them. There were unwashed tin plates and pannikins, knives, and spoons, sliding up and down everywhere, and the deck was foul with slops of tea, and trodden bread, and marmalade. Now and then, in a wilder roll than usual, a frowsy, huddled object slid groaning down the slant of slimy planking, but in every case the helpless passenger was fully dressed. Steerage passengers, in fact, seldom take off their clothes. For one thing, all their worldly possessions are, as a rule, secreted among their garments, and for another, most of those hailing from beyond the Danube have never been accustomed to disrobing. In the midst of the confusion, two half-sick steward lads were making ineffective efforts to straighten up the mess.

Agatha made out that a swarm of urchins were huddled together in a helpless mass along one side of the horrible place. The sergeant was haranguing them, while another man, whom she supposed to be the petty officer, pulled them to their feet one by one. A good deal of his labor was wasted, for the *Scarrowmania* was rolling viciously, and as soon as a few were placed upright half of them collapsed again. Wyllard glanced towards the boys compassionately.

"I believe most of them have had nothing to eat since they came on board, though it isn't the company's fault," he said. "There's food enough served out, but before we picked the breeze up the men laid hands upon it first and half of it was wasted in the scramble. Then it seems they pitched these youngsters out of their berths."

"Don't they belong to anybody?" Agatha asked. "Is there no one to look after them?"

Wyllard smiled. "I believe one of your charitable institutions is sending them out, and there seems to be a clergyman, who has a curate and a lay assistant to help him, in charge of them. The assistant won't be available while this rolling lasts, and the other two very naturally prefer the saloon. In a way, that's comprehensible."

He left her, and proceeded to help the man who was dragging the urchins to their feet.

"Get up!" commanded the sergeant. "Get up, and fall in. Dress from the left, and number off, the ones who can stand."

It appeared that the lads had been drilled, for they scrambled into a line that bent and wavered each time the *Scarrowmania's* bows went down. After that, every other lad stepped forward at the word. The order was, "Left turn. March, and fall in on deck," and when they feebly clambered up the ladder Wyllard, who turned to Agatha, pointed to a door in a bulkhead of rough white wood.

"It should have been locked, but I fancy you can get in that way, and up through another hatch," he remarked. "The single women, and women with children, are in yonder, and if you want to be useful there's a field for you. Get as many as possible up on deck."

Agatha left him, and her face was rather white when at last she came up into the open air, with about a dozen forlorn, draggled women trailing helplessly after her. The lads were now sitting down in a double line on deck, each with a tin plate and a steaming pannikin in front of him. There were at least a hundred of them, and a man with a bronzed face and the stamp of command upon him was giving them the order of the voyage. He was the one she had already noticed.

"You'll turn out at the whistle at half-past six," he said. "Shake mattresses, roll up blankets, and prepare for berth inspection. Then, at the next whistle, you'll fall in on deck stripped to the waist for washing parade. Fourth files numbering even are orderlies in charge of the plates and pannikins."

"And," announced the sergeant, "any insubordination will be sharply dealt with. Now, when I was with Roberts in Afghanistan——"

Wyllard, who was standing close by, turned to Agatha.

"I don't think we'll be wanted. You have probably earned your breakfast."

They went back to the saloon deck, and the girl smiled when he looked at her inquiringly.

"It was a little horrible, but I hadn't so many to deal with," she said. "Do you, and those others, expect to bring any order out of that chaos?"

"No," answered Wyllard, "with a little encouragement they'll do it themselves. That is, the English, Danes, and Germans. One can trust them to evolve a workable system. It's in their nature. You can trace most things that tend to wholesome efficiency back to the old Teutonic leaven. By and by, they'll proceed to put some pressure on the Latins, Slavs, and Jews."

"But is it your business to offer them that encouragement?"

Wyllard laughed. "Strictly speaking, it isn't in the least, but unnecessary chaos is hateful, and, any way, I'm not the only one who doesn't seem to like it. There's the petty officer, and our friend, the sergeant, who was with Roberts in Afghanistan."

Agatha said nothing further. She was a little surprised to feel that she was anxious to keep this man's good opinion, though that was not exactly why she had nerved herself for the venture into the single women's quarters. Leaving him out altogether, it seemed to her that there was something rather fine in the way that the sergeant and the petty officer who was going out almost penniless to Canada, had saddled themselves with the task of looking after those helpless lads. It was wholly unpaid labor, for which the men who preferred to remain within the safe limits of the saloon deck would presumably get the credit. After all, she decided, there were, no doubt, men in every station who helped to keep the world sweet and clean, and she believed that Wyllard was to be counted among them. He certainly differed in many ways from Gregory, but then Gregory was unapproachable. She did not remember that it was four years since she had seen Hawtrey, and that her ideas had been a little unformed then.

In the evening, Mrs. Hastings, with whom he was evidently a favorite, happened to speak of Wyllard, and the efforts he was making in the steerage, and Agatha asked a question.

"Does he often undertake this kind of thing?"

"No," Mrs. Hastings answered with a smile. "Any way, not on so large a scale. He's very far from setting up as a professional philanthropist, my dear. I don't remember his offering to point out duty to other folks, and I don't think he goes about in search of an opportunity of benefiting humanity. Still, when an individual case thrusts itself beneath his nose, he generally does what he can."

"I've heard people say that the individual method only perpetuates the trouble," remarked Agatha.

Mrs. Hastings shook her head. "That," she said, "is a subject I'm not well posted on, but it seems to me that if other folks only adopted Harry Wyllard's simple plan, there would be considerably less need for organized charity."

CHAPTER IX

THE FOG

During the next two days before a moderate gale the *Scarrowmania* shouldered her way westwards through the big, white-topped combers that rolled down upon her under a lowering sky. There were no luxurious, steam-propelled hotels in the Canadian trade at this time, and loaded deep with railway metal as she was, the vessel slopped in the green seas everywhere, and rolled her streaming sides out almost to her bilge. She shivered and rattled horribly when her single screw swung clear and the tri-compound engines ran away.

Wyllard went down to the steerage every now and then, and Agatha, who contrived to keep on her feet, not infrequently accompanied him. She was glad of his society, for Mrs. Hastings was seldom in evidence, and no efforts could get Miss Rawlinson out of her berth. The gale blew itself out at length, and the evening after it moderated Agatha was sitting near the head of one fiddle-guarded table in the saloon waiting for dinner, which the stewards had still some difficulty in bringing in. Wyllard's place was next to hers, but he had not appeared, nor had the skipper, who, however, did not invariably dine with the passengers. One of the two doors which led from the foot of the branching companion stairway into either side of the saloon stood open, and presently she saw Wyllard standing just outside it.

He beckoned to the doctor, who sat at the foot of her table, and the physician merely raised his brows a trifle. He was a rather consequential person, and it was evident to the girl that he resented being summoned by a gesture. She did not think anybody else had noticed Wyllard, and she waited with some curiosity to see what he would do. He made a sign with a lifted hand, and she felt that the doctor would obey it, as, in fact, he did, though his manner was very far from conciliatory. By dint of listening closely, she could hear their conversation.

"I'm sorry to trouble you just now," apologized Wyllard, "and I didn't come in because that would have set everybody wondering what you were wanted for; but one of those boys forward has been thrown down the ladder, and has cut his head."

"Ah!" said the doctor. "I'll see to him—after dinner."

"It's a nasty cut," declared Wyllard. "He's losing a good deal of blood."

"Then I would suggest that you apply to my assistant."

"As I don't know where he is, I have come to you."

The doctor made a sign of impatience. "Well," he said "you have told me, which I think is as far as your concern in the matter goes. I may add that I'm not accustomed to dictation on behalf of a steerage passenger."

Agatha saw Wyllard slip between the doctor and the entrance to the saloon, but she saw also the skipper appear a few paces behind them, and glance at them sharply. He was usually a silent man, at home in the ice and the clammy fog, but not a great acquisition in the saloon.

"Something wrong down forward, Mr. Wyllard? They were making a great row a little while ago," the skipper said.

"Nothing very serious," Wyllard answered. "One of the boys has cut his head."

The skipper turned towards the doctor and Agatha guessed that he had overheard part of the conversation.

"Don't you think you had better go—at once?" suggested the skipper.

The doctor evidently did, for he disappeared, and Wyllard, who entered the saloon with the skipper, sat down at Agatha's side.

"How do you do it?" she asked.

"What?" returned Wyllard, beginning his dinner.

"We'll say persuade other folks to see things as you do.

"You evidently mean the skipper, and I suppose you heard something of what was going on. In this case, I'm indebted to his prejudices. He's one of the old type—a seaman first of all—and what we call bluff, and you call bounce, has only one effect upon men of his kind. It gets their backs up."

Agatha thought that he did not like it, either, but she changed the subject.

"There really was a row forward," she said. "What was the trouble over? You were, no doubt, somewhere near the scene of it."

Wyllard laughed. "I sat upon the steerage ladder, and am afraid I cheered the combatants on. It was really a glorious row. They hammered each other with tin plates, and some of them tried to use hoop-iron knives, which fortunately doubled up. They broke quite a few of the benches, and wrecked the mess table, but so far as I noticed the only one seriously hurt was a little chap who was quietly looking on."

"And you encouraged them?"

"I certainly did. It was a protest against dirt, disorder, and the slothfulness that's a plague to the community. Isn't physical force warranted when there's no other remedy?"

A gray-haired Canadian looked up. "Yes," he agreed, "I guess it is. The first man who pulled his gun in

British Columbia was hanged right away, and they've scarcely had to make an example of another since then, though it was quite a while ago."

He paused, and smiled approvingly. "A mess of any kind worries us, and we don't take long to straighten it out. Same feeling's in the Germans and Scandinavians. I'll say that for them, any way. Your friends swept up the steerage?"

"They took the Slavs and Jews, and pitched them down the second hatch on to the orlop deck. Things will go smoothly now our crowd is on top."

"Your crowd?" said Agatha.

The Canadian nodded. "That's what he meant," he said. "There are two kinds of folks you and the rest of them are dumping into Canada. One's the kind that will get up and hustle, break land, and build new homes—log at first, frame and stone afterwards. They go on from a quarter-section and a team of oxen to the biggest farm they can handle, and every fresh furrow they cut enriches all of us. The other kind want to sit down in the dirt and take life easily, as they've always done. The dirt worries everybody else, and we've no use for them. By and by our Legislature will have to wake up and stop them from getting in."

He went on with his dinner, but his observations left Agatha thoughtful. She was beginning to understand one side of Wyllard's character. He, it seemed, stood for practical efficiency. There was a driving force in him that made for progress and order. It was apparently his mission to straighten things out. Some persons of his kind, she reflected, now and then made a good deal of avoidable trouble; but there was in this man, at least, a half-whimsical toleration, which rendered that an unlikely thing in his particular case. Besides, she had already recognized that she was in some respects fortunate in having such a man for her companion.

Her deck chair was always set out in the most sheltered and comfortable place. If there was anything to be seen he almost invariably appeared with a pair of powerful glasses. She was watched over, her wishes were anticipated, and the man was seldom obtrusively present when she felt disposed to talk to somebody else. It struck her that she had thought a great deal about him during the last few days, and rather less than usual about Gregory, which was partly the reason she did not walk up and down the deck with him, as usual, after dinner that evening.

Three or four days later, the *Scarrowmania* ran into the Bank fog, and burrowed through it with whistle hooting dolefully at regular intervals. Now and then an answering ringing of bells came out of the clammy vapor, and the half-seen shape of an anchored schooner loomed up, rolling wildly on gray slopes of sea. Once, too, a tiny dory, half filled with lines and buoys, slid by plunging on the wash flung off by the *Scarrowmania's* bows, and Agatha understood that the men in her had escaped death by a hairsbreadth. They were cod fishers, Wyllard told her, and he added that there was a host of them at work somewhere in the sliding haze. She imagined, now and then, that the fog had a depressing effect on him, and that when the dory lay beneath the rail there had been an unusual look in his face.

A breeze came out of the northwest, with the sting of the ice in it, but the fog did not lift, and the *Scarrowmania* plunged on through it with spray-wet decks and the gray seas smashing about her bows. It was bitterly cold and the raw wind pierced to the bone, but the voyage was rapidly shortening.

One evening Agatha paced the deck with Wyllard. The girl was in a strangely unsettled mood. Perhaps it was merely the gloom of the sea and sky reacting upon her that caused her to look forward to the landing with a certain half-conscious shrinking. They stopped by the rails presently, looking out upon the tumbling seas that, tipped with livid froth, rolled out of the sliding haze, and the dreariness of the surroundings intensified the girl's depression. There was something unpleasantly suggestive in the sight of the fog that hid everything, for Agatha had been troubled with a half-apprehensive longing to see what lay before her. She noticed the lookout, a lonely, shapeless figure, standing amid the spray that whirled about the plunging bows. By and by she saw him turn and wave an arm toward the bridge behind her, and she heard a hoarse cry. What it meant she could not tell, but in another moment the *Scarrowmania's* whistle shrieked.

A gray shape burst out of the vapor and grew with astonishing swiftness into dim tiers of slanted sailcloth swaying above a strip of hull that moved amid a broad white smear of foam. It was a brig under fore-course and topsails, and as the girl watched the vessel it sank to the tilted bowsprit, and a big gray and white sea foamed about the bows.

"Aren't we dreadfully near?" she asked.

Wyllard did not answer. He was gazing up at the bridge, and once more the whistle gave a warning blast. It seemed that the two vessels could hardly pass clear of each other.

Wyllard laid a hand upon Agatha's shoulder.

"The skipper's starboarding. We'll go around to the stern," he said.

His grasp was reassuring, and Agatha watched the straining curves of canvas and the line of half-submerged hull. The brig rose with streaming bows, swung high above the sea, sank again, and vanished with bewildering suddenness into a belt of driving fog.

Agatha was not sure that there had been any peril, but it was certainly past now, and she was rather puzzled by her sensations when Wyllard had held her shoulder. For one thing, she had felt instinctively that she was safe with him. She decided not to trouble herself about the reason for this, and presently she looked up at him. The expression that she had noticed now and then was once more in his face.

"I don't think you like the fog any more than I do," she said.

"No," responded Wyllard, with a quiet forcefulness that startled her. "I hate it."

"Why?"

"It recalls something that still gives me a very bad few minutes every once in a while. It has been worrying me again to-night."

"I wonder," said Agatha simply, "if you would care to tell me?"

The man looked down on her. "I haven't told it often, but you shall hear," he replied. "It's a tale of a black failure." He stretched out a hand and pointed to the ranks of tumbling seas. "It was very much this kind of night, and we were lying, reefed down, off one of the Russians' beaches, when I asked for volunteers. I got them—two boats' crews of the finest seamen that ever handled oar or sealing rifle."

"But what did you want them for?"

"A boat from another schooner had been cast ashore. It was blowing hard, as it usually does where the Polar ice comes down into the Behring Sea. They'd been shooting seals. We meant to bring the men off if we could manage it."

"Wouldn't one boat have been enough?"

"No," answered Wyllard dryly, "we had three, and I think that was one cause of the trouble. There was one from the other schooner. You see, those seals belonged to the Russians, and we free-lances could shoot them only off shore. I'm not sure that the men in the wrecked boat had been fishing outside the limit."

Agatha did not press for further particulars, and he went on.

"We managed to make a landing, though one boat went up bottom uppermost. I fancy they must have broken or lost an oar then. We got the wrecked men, but we had trouble while we were getting the boats off again. The surf was running in savagely, and the fog shut down as solid as a wall. Any way, we pulled off, and went out with a foot of water in one boat. One of the rescued men took my oar when I let it go."

"Why did you let it go?"

Wyllard laughed in a grim fashion.

"My head was laid open with a sealing club," he said. "Some of the other men had their scratches, but they managed to row. For one thing, they knew they had to. They had reasons for not wanting to fall into the Russians' hands. Well, we cleared the beach, and once or twice, as I tried to bale, there was a shout somewhere near us, and the loom of a vanishing boat. It was all we could make out, for the sea was slopping into the boat, and the spray was flying everywhere. If there had been only two boats we probably would have found out our misfortune, and perhaps would have set it straight. As it was, we couldn't tell that it was the same boat that had hailed us."

He broke off for a moment, and then added quietly:

"Two boats reached the schooners. There was a nasty sea running then, and it blew viciously hard next day. There were three men in the other."

"Ah!" cried Agatha, "they were drowned?"

Wyllard made a forceful gesture. "I'm not quite sure. That's the trouble. At least, the boat was nowhere on the beach next day, and it's difficult to see how the men could have faced the sea that piled up when the gale came down. In all probability, they had an oar short, and the boat rolled them out when a comber broke upon her in the darkness." The girl saw him close one hand tight as he added, "If one only knew!"

"What would have befallen them if they had reached shore?"

"It's difficult to say. They could have been handed over to the Russian authorities. Still, sealers poaching up there have simply disappeared."

He stopped again, and glanced out at the gathering darkness. "Now," he concluded, "you see why I hate the fog."

"But you couldn't help it," said Agatha.

"Well," answered Wyllard, "I asked for volunteers, and the money that is now mine came out of those schooners. It's just possible those men are living still—somewhere in Northern Asia. I only know that they disappeared."

He abruptly began to talk of something else, and by and by Agatha went down to the saloon, where Miss Rawlinson, who had not been much in evidence during the voyage, presently made her appearance.

"Aren't you going into the music-room to play for Mr. Wyllard—as usual?" she inquired.

Agatha was disconcerted. She had fallen into the habit of spending half an hour or longer in the little music-room every evening, with Wyllard standing near the piano; but now her friend's question seemed to place a significance upon the fact.

"No," she replied, "I don't think I am."

"Then the rest of them will wonder whether you have fallen out with him."

"Fallen out with him?"

Winifred laughed. "They've naturally been watching both of you, and, in a general way, there's only one decision they could have arrived at."

Agatha flushed a little, but Winifred went on.

"I don't mind admitting that if a man of that kind was to fall in love with me, I'd black his boots for him," she said. She added, with a rueful gesture, "Still, it's most unlikely."

Agatha looked at her with a little glint in her eyes.

"He is merely Gregory's deputy," she said, with a subconscious feeling that the word "deputy" was not a fortunate one. "In that connection, I should like to point out that you can estimate a man's character by that of his friends."

"Oh," rejoined Winifred, "then if Mr. Wyllard's strong points merely heighten Gregory's virtues, I've nothing more to say. Any way, I'll reserve my homage until I've seen Gregory. Perfection among men is scarce nowadays."

She turned away, and left Agatha thoughtful. In the meanwhile, Mrs. Hastings came upon Wyllard alone in the music-room.

"You look quite serious," she remarked.

"I've been thinking about Miss Ismay and Gregory," Wyllard replied. "In fact, I feel a little anxious about them."

"In what way?"

"Without making any reflections upon Gregory, I somewhat feel sorry for the girl."

Mrs. Hastings nodded. "As a matter of fact, that's very much what I felt from the first," she admitted. "Still, you see, there's the important fact that she's fond of him, and it should smooth out a good many difficulties. Anyway, she's evidently rather a courageous person."

Wyllard sat silent a moment or two. "I wasn't troubling about the material difficulties—lack of wealth and all that," he said. "I was wondering if she really could be fond of him. It is some years since she was much in his company."

"Hawtrey is not a man to change."

"That," returned Wyllard, "is just the trouble. I've no doubt he's much the same, but one could fancy that Miss Ismay has changed a good deal since she last saw him. She'll look for considerably more than she was probably content with then."

"In any case, it isn't your affair." Mrs. Hastings smiled significantly.

"In one sense it certainly isn't; but I can't help feeling a little troubled about the thing. You see, Gregory is quite an old friend."

"And the girl is going to marry him," said Mrs. Hastings, raising her eyebrows.

Wyllard rose. "That reminder," he said, "is quite uncalled for. I would like to assure you of it."

He went out, and Mrs. Hastings sat still in a reflective mood.

"If she begins to compare him with Hawtrey, there can be only one result," she said.

The fog had almost gone next morning, and pale sunshine streamed down upon a a froth-flecked sea. A bitter wind, however, still came out of the hazy north, and the

Scarrowmania's plates were crusted with ice where the highest crests of the tumbling seas reached them. The spray froze, and the decks grew slippery. When darkness came, nobody but the seamen faced the stinging cold. Agatha felt the engines stop late that night, and when she went out next morning the decks were white, and she could see dim ghosts of sliding pines through a haze of falling snow that became bewilderingly thick at times, but the steamer slid on through it with whistle hooting. At last toward sunset the snow cleared away and Agatha stood shivering under a deck-house. She looked about her with a curiously heavy heart.

A gray haze stretched across the great river, which was dim and gray, and odd wisps of pines rose raggedly beneath the white hills that cut against a gloomy, lowering sky. Deck-house, boat, and stanchion dripped, and every now and then the silence was broken by a doleful blast of the whistle. Nothing moved on the still, gray water, there was no sign of life ashore, and they seemed to be steaming into a great desolation.

Presently, Wyllard appeared from somewhere, and, after a glance at her face, slipped his hand beneath her arm, and led her down to the lighted saloon. There her heart grew a little lighter. Once more she was conscious of the feeling that she was safe with him.

CHAPTER X

DISILLUSION

The long train was speeding smoothly across the vast white levels of Assiniboia, when Agatha, who sat by a window, looked up as the conductor strode through the car. Mrs. Hastings asked him a question, and he stopped a moment.

"Yes," he said, "we'll be in Clermont inside half an hour."

He went on, and Mrs. Hastings smiled at Agatha.

"We're a little late, and Gregory will be waiting for us in the station now," she announced. "No doubt he's got the wagon fixed up right, but I'd like to feel sure of it. There's a long drive before us, and I want to reach the homestead before it's dark."

Agatha said nothing, but a faint tinge of color crept into her cheeks, and Mrs. Hastings was glad to see it, for she had noticed that the girl was looking pale and haggard. The strain of the last few months that she had spent in England was beginning to tell on her She had borne it courageously, but a reaction had set in, and the trip had been fatiguing. The *Scarrowmania* had plunged along, bows under, against fresh northwesterly gales most of the way across the Atlantic, and there is very little comfort on board a small, deeply-loaded steamer when she rolls her rails in, and lurches with thudding screw swung clear over big, steep-sided combers. Moreover, Agatha had scarcely slept during the few days and nights that she had spent in the train. It takes time to become accustomed to the atmosphere of a heated sleeper, and since she had landed she had been in a state of not unnatural nervous tension.

She had found it difficult to preserve an outward serenity, the previous day. When, at last, the great train ran into the depot at Winnipeg, where Gregory had arranged to meet them, it was with a thrill of expectancy and relief that she stood upon the car platform. There was, however, no sign of Gregory, and, though Wyllard handed her a telegram from him a few minutes later, the fact that he had not arrived had a depressing effect on her. Quiet as she usually was, the girl was highly strung. Something had gone wrong with Hawtrey's wagon while he was driving in to the railroad, and as the result of it he had missed the Atlantic train. She could not blame him for the accident, but for all that his absence was an unpleasant shock.

Feeling that her companions' eyes were upon her, she turned, and looking out of the window found no encouragement in what she saw. The snow had gone, and a vast expanse of grass ran back to the horizon! But it was a dingy, grayish-white, and not green, as it had been in England. The sky was low and gray, too, and the only thing that broke the dreary monotony of lifeless color was the formless, darker smear of a birch bluff that rose out of the empty levels. Her heart throbbed unpleasantly fast as the few remaining minutes slipped away. She started when a dingy mass of something that looked like buildings lifted itself above the prairie.

"The Clermont elevators," said Mrs. Hastings. "We'll be in directly."

The mass separated itself into two or three tall component blocks. A huddle of little wooden houses grew into shape beneath them, and a shrill whistle came ringing back above the slowing cars. A willow bluff, half filled with old cans and garbage, flitted by, a big bell began tolling, and Agatha rose when Mrs. Hastings took up her furs from a seat close by. After that, the girl found herself standing on the platform of the car, though she did not quite know how she got there, for she was sensible only of the fact that in another moment or two she would greet the lover whom she had not seen for four years.

Though she paid no great attention to them the surroundings had a depressing effect on her. There was, however, very little to see. The mass of the great elevators that were silhoueted against a lowering sky, the little cluster of houses, and the sea of churned-up mire between them and the track comprised Clermont. There appeared to be no station except a big water tank and a rather unsightly shed, about which stood a group of blurred and shapeless figures. It seemed very cold, and Agatha shivered as she felt the raw wind strike through her.

One of the figures detached itself from the rest and grew clearer. The man wore an old skin coat spattered with flakes of mire, and his long boots were covered with clots of mud. His fur cap looked greasy, and the fur had been rubbed off it in patches. But while Agatha noticed these things it was Hawtrey's face that struck her most distinctly, and she became conscious of an astonishment which was mixed with vague misgivings as she gazed at it, for it had subtly changed since she had last seen it. The joyous sparkle that she remembered had gone out of the eyes. They were harder, bolder, than they used to be. The mouth was slack—it looked almost sensual—and the man's whole personality seemed to have grown coarser. As she thrust the disconcerting fancies from her the car stopped.

In another moment Hawtrey sprang up on the platform, and his arms were about her. That brought the blood to her face, but she felt none of the thrill that she had ex-

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pected. Indeed, she was conscious of a certain shrinking from his embrace. He must have lifted her down, for, when she was next aware of the presence of the friends with whom she had traveled, she stood beside the track with Mrs. Hastings, a man whom she supposed to be Mr. Hastings, Winifred and Wyllard about her. Another man also was standing close by, apparently waiting until they noticed him. He was covered with mire, his skin coat was very dilapidated, and Agatha thought that his boots never had been cleaned. His hair, which had evidently been badly cut, straggled out from under his old fur cap.

Gregory apparently explained something to Mrs. Hastings. "No," he said, "I'm sorry it can't be for another week. Horribly unfortunate. It seems they've sent the Methodist on down the line, and we'll have to wait for the Episcopalian. He'll be at Lander's for a few days."

Agatha's cheeks flamed, for she realized that it was her wedding of which they were speaking; but it brought her a curious relief to hear that it had been deferred. A moment or two later Gregory turned to her with questions about his people in England.

Winifred had separated herself from the group. She was standing near her baggage, which had been flung out beside the track, when Wyllard strode up to her.

"Feeling rather out of it? I do, any way," he remarked. "Since we appear superfluous, we may as well make the most of the opportunity, especially as it will probably save you a long drive. There's a man here who wants to see you."

Winifred had felt forlorn a few moments earlier, but the announcement Wyllard made was reassuring, and she brightened perceptibly as he signaled to a man who was standing a little further along the track. The stranger wore rather good store clothes, and his manner was brisk and wholly business-like. It was a certain relief to the girl to see that he evidently regarded her less as a personality than as a piece of commercial machinery, of which apparently he had been asked to make use. She had found it easier to get on with men who looked upon her as merely part of the office equipment.

"Mr. Hamilton is in charge of the elevator yonder," explained Wyllard, pointing to one of the huge buildings.

Then he introduced Miss Rawlinson.

The elevator man made her the curtest of bows and proceeded to arrange matters with a rapidity which almost took her breath away.

"Typist and stenographer?" he asked. "Know anything about keeping accounts?"

Winifred admitted that she possessed these qualifications and Hamilton appeared to reflect for a moment or two.

"Well," he said, "in a fortnight we'll give you a show. "You can start at—" and he mentioned terms which rather astonished Winifred. "If you can keep things straight we may raise you later."

"Won't you want to see any testimonials?" she asked.

"No," answered Hamilton. "I've seen a good many and I'm inclined to believe some of the folks who showed them to me must have bought them." He waved his hand. "Mr. Wyllard assures me that you'll do, and that's quite enough for me."

It struck Winifred as curious that, while Agatha had written to Hawtrey on her behalf, it was Wyllard who had secured her the opportunity for which she had longed.

"There's another matter," she said hesitatingly, when she was left with Wyllard, "I'll have to live here?"

Wyllard smiled. "I've seen to that, though if you don't like my arrangements you can alter them afterwards. Mrs.

Sandberg will take you in. She's a Scotch Calvinist, and even if she isn't particularly amiable you'll be in safe hands. We'll consider it as fixed, but you're to stay with Mrs. Hastings for a fortnight. Sproatly"—he signed to the man in the skin coat—"will you get Miss Rawlinson's baggage into your wagon?"

The man took off his fur cap. "If Miss Rawlinson would like to see Mrs. Sandberg, I'll drive her round," he suggested. "We'll catch you in a league or so. Gregory has a bit of patching to do on his off-side trace."

"He might have had things straight for once," grumbled Wyllard half-aloud.

Winifred permitted Sproatly to help her into his wagon—a high, narrow-bodied vehicle, mounted on tall, spidery wheels—but she had to hold fast to the seat while they jolted across the track and through a sea of mire into the unpaved street of the little town. She liked Sproatly's voice and manner, though she was far from prepossessed by his appearance. Two or three minutes later he stopped before a little wooden house, where they were received by a tall, hard-faced woman, who frowned at the man.

"Ye'll tak' your patent medicines somewhere else. I'm wanting none," she said.

Sproatly grinned. "You needn't be afraid of them. They couldn't hurt you. I was talking to a Winnipeg doctor who'd a notion of coming out a day or two ago. I told him if he did he'd have to bring an ax along."

Then he explained that Wyllard had sent Miss Rawlinson there, and the woman favored her with a glance of careful scrutiny.

"Weel," she said, "ye look quiet, anyway." She added, as if further satisfied, "I'll make ye a cup of tea if ye can wait."

Sproatly assured her that they had not time to accept her hospitality. The girl went into the house for a few moments and returned to the wagon with relief in her face.

"I think I owe Mr. Wyllard a good deal," she said.

Sproatly laughed. "You're not exactly unusual in that respect," he declared as he started the horses. "But you had better hold tight. These beasts are less than half broken."

He flicked the horses with the whip, and they went across the track at a gallop, hurling great clods of mud left and right, while the group of loungers who still stood about the station raised a shout.

"Got any little pictures with nice motters on them?" asked one, and another flung a piece of information after the jolting wagon.

"There's a Swede down at Branker's wants a bottle that will limber up a wooden leg," he said.

Sproatly grinned, and waved his hands to them before he turned to Winifred.

"We have to get through before dark, if possible, or I'd stop and sell them something sure," he said. "Parts of the trail further on are simply horrible."

It occurred to Winifred that the road was far from good as it was, for spouts of mud flew up beneath the sinking hoofs and wheels, and she was already unpleasantly spattered.

"You think you would have succeeded making a sale?" she asked with amusement in her eyes.

"Oh, yes," Sproatly answered confidently. "If I couldn't plant something on to them when they'd given me a lead like that, I'd be no use in this business. At present, my command of Western phraseology is my fortune."

"You sell things, then?"

Sproatly pointed to two big boxes in the bottom of the wagon. "Anything from cough cure to hair restorer, besides a general purpose elixir that's specially prepared for me. It's adaptable to any complaint and season. All you have to do"—and he lowered his voice confidently—"is to put on a different label."

Winifred laughed when she met his eyes.

"What happens to the people who buy it?" she inquired.

"Most of them are bachelors, and tough. They've stood their own cooking so long that they ought to be impervious to anything, and if anybody's really sick I hold off and tell him to wait until he can get a doctor. A sensitive conscience," he added reflectively, "is quite a handicap in this business."

"You have always been in it?" asked Winifred.

"No," replied Sproatly, "although you mightn't believe it, I was raised with the idea that I should have my choice between the Church and the Bar. The idea, however, proved—impracticable—which is rather a pity. It has seemed to me that a man who can work off cough cures and cosmetics on to healthy folks and talk a scoffer off the field, ought to have made his mark in either calling."

He looked at her as if for confirmation of this view, but Winifred, who laughed again, glanced at the two wagons that, several miles away, moved across the gray-white sweep of prairie.

"Shall we overtake them?" she asked.

"We'll probably come up with Gregory. I'm not sure about Wyllard."

"He drives faster horses?"

"That's not quite the reason. Gregory has patched up one trace with a bit of string, and odd bolts are rather addicted to coming out of his wagon. Sometimes it makes trouble. I've known the team to leave him sitting on the prairie, thinking of endearing names for them, while they came home with the pole."

"Does he generally let things fall into that state?"

Sproatly was evidently on his guard.

"Well," he rejoined, "it's certainly that kind of wagon."

He flicked the team again, and the jolting rendered it difficult for Winifred to ask any more questions. The prairie sod was soft with the thaw, and big lumps of it stuck to the wheels, which every now and then plunged into ruts the other vehicles had made.

In the meanwhile, Agatha and Hawtrey had found it almost impossible to sustain a conversation. It was a relief to the girl to be able to sit silent and observant beside the man whom she had promised to marry. The string-patched trace still held, and the wagon pole was a new one. The white grass was tussocky and long, and the trail here and there had been churned into quagmire. Hawtrey had packed the thick driving-robe high about Agatha and had slipped one arm about her waist beneath it; but she was conscious that she rather suffered this than derived any satisfaction from it. She strove to assure herelf that she was jaded with the journey, which was, in fact, the case, and that the lowering sky, and the cheerless waste they were crossing, had occasioned the dejection that she felt. There was not a tree upon the vast sweep of bleached grass which ran all around her to the horizon. It was inexpressibly lonely, a lifeless desolation, with only the plowed-up trail to show that man had ever traversed it. The raw wind which came across the prairie set her shivering.

She was forced, however, to admit that her weariness and the dreary surroundings did not quite explain everything. Gregory's first embrace had brought her no happiness, and now the close pressure of his arm left her quite unmoved. This was disconcerting; but while she would admit no definite reason for it, there was creeping upon her a vague consciousness that the man beside her was not the one of whom she had so often thought in England. He seemed different—almost, in fact, a stranger—though she could not exactly tell where the change in him began. His laughter jarred upon her. Some of the things he said appeared almost inane, and others were tinged with a self-confidence that did not become him. It seemed to her that he was shallow and lacking in comprehension. Once she found herself comparing him with another man. She broke off that train of thought abruptly, and once more endeavored to find the explanation in herself. Weariness had produced this captious, hypercritical fit, and by and by she would become used to him, she said.

Hawtrey was, at least, not effusive, for which she was thankful. When they reached a smoother stretch of road he began to talk of England.

"I suppose you saw a good deal of my folks when you were at the Grange," he said.

"No," answered Agatha, "I saw them once or twice."

"Ah!" he replied, with a trace of sharpness, "then they were not particularly agreeable?"

It seemed to Agatha that he was tactless in suggesting anything of the kind, but she replied candidly.

"One could hardly go quite so far as that," she told him. "Still, I couldn't help a feeling that it was rather an effort for them to be gracious to me."

"They did what they could to make things pleasant when they were first told of our engagement."

Agatha was too weary to be altogether on her guard. His relatives' attitude had wounded her, and she answered without reflection.

"I have fancied that was because they never quite believed it would lead to anything."

She knew this was the truth now, though it was the first time the explanation had occurred to her. Gregory's relatives, who were naturally acquainted with his character, had not expected him to carry out his promise. She felt that she had been injudicious in what she told him when she heard his harsh laugh.

"I'm afraid they never had a very great opinion of me," he remarked.

"Then," said Agatha, looking up at him, "it will be our business to prove them wrong; but I can't help feeling that you have undertaken a big responsibility, Gregory. There must be so much that I ought to do, and I know so little about your work in this country." She turned, and glanced with a shiver at the dim, white prairie. "The land looks so forbidding and unyielding. It must be very hard to turn it into wheat fields—to break it in."

It was merely a hint of what she felt, and it was rather a pity that Hawtrey, who lacked imagination, usually contented himself with the most obvious meaning of the spoken word. Things might have gone differently had he responded with comprehending sympathy.

"Oh," he said, with a laugh that changed her mood, "you'll learn, and I don't suppose it will matter a great deal if you don't do it quickly. Somehow or other one worries through."

She felt that this was insufficient, though she remembered that his haphazard carelessness had once appealed to her. Now she realized that to undertake a thing lightheartedly was a very different matter from carrying it out successfully. Then it once more occurred to her that she was becoming absurdly hypercritical, and she strove to talk of other things.

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She did not find it easy, nor, though he made the effort, did Hawtrey. There was a restraint upon him, for when he first saw her he had been struck by the change in the girl. She was graver than he remembered her, and, it seemed, very much more reserved. He had tried and failed, as he thought of it, to strike any response in her. He became uneasily conscious that he could not talk to her as he could to Sally Creighton. There was something wanting in him or her, but he could not at the moment tell what it was. Still, he assured himself, things would be different next day, for the girl was evidently very tired.

The creeping dusk settled down upon the wilderness. The horizon narrowed, and the stretch of grass before them grew dim. The trail they now drove into grew rapidly rougher, and it was quite dark when they came to the brink of a declivity still at least a league from the Hastings homestead. It was one of the steep ravines that seam the prairie. A birch bluff rose on either side, and a little creek flowed through the hollow.

Hawtrey swung the whip when they reached the top, and the team plunged furiously down the slope. He straightened himself in his seat with both hands on the reins, and Agatha held her breath when she felt the light vehicle tilt as the wheels on one side sank deep in a rut. Something seemed to crack, and she saw the off horse stumble and plunge. The other horse flung its head up, Hawtrey shouted something, and there was a great smashing and snapping of undergrowth and fallen branches as they drove in among the birches. The team stopped, and Hawtrey, who sprang down, floundered noisily among the undergrowth, while another thud of hoofs and rattle of wheels grew louder behind them up the trail. In a minute or two Hawtrey came back and lifted Agatha down.

"It's the trace broken. I had to make the holes with my knife, and the string's torn through," he explained. "Voltigeur got it round his feet, and, as usual, tried to bolt. We'll make the others pull up and take you in."

They went back to the trail together, and reached it just as Hastings reined in his team. Hastings got down and walked back with Hawtrey to the stalled wagon. It was a minute or two before they reappeared again, and Mrs. Hastings, who had alighted, drew Hawtrey aside.

"I almost think it would be better if you didn't come any further to-night," she said.

"Why?" Gregory asked sharply.

"I can't help thinking that Agatha would prefer it. For one thing, she's rather jaded, and wants quiet."

"You feel sure of that?"

There was something in the man's voice which suggested that he was not quite satisfied, and Mrs. Hastings was silent a moment.

"It's good advice, Gregory," she said. "She'll be better able to face the situation after a night's rest."

"Does it require much facing?" Hawtrey asked dryly.

Mrs. Hastings turned from him with a sign of impatience. "Of course it does. Anyway, if you're wise you'll do what I suggest, and ask no more questions."

Then she got into the wagon, and Hawtrey stood still beside the trail, feeling unusually thoughtful as they drove away.

CHAPTER XI

AGATHA'S DECISION

It was with an expectancy which was toned down by misgivings that Hawtrey drove over to the homestead where Agatha was staying the next afternoon. The misgivings were not unnatural, for he had been chilled by the girl's reception of him on the previous day, and her manner afterwards had, he felt, left something to be desired. Indeed, when she drove away with Mrs. Hastings, he had considered himself an injured man.

His efforts to mend the harness, and extricate the wagon in the dark, which occupied him for an hour, had helped partly to drive the matter from his mind, and when he reached his homestead rather late that night he went to sleep, and slept soundly until sunrise. Hawtrey was a man who never brooded over his troubles beforehand, and this was one reason why he did not always cope with them successfully when they could no longer be avoided.

When he had eaten his breakfast, however, he became sensible of a certain pique against both Mrs. Hastings and Agatha. In planning for the day he was forced to remember that he had no hired man, and that there was a good deal to be done. He decided that it might be well to wait until the afternoon before he called on Agatha, and for several hours he drove his team through the crackling stubble. His doubts and irritation grew weaker as he worked, and when, later, he drove into sight of the Hastings homestead, his buoyant temperament was beginning to reassert itself. Clear sunshine streamed down upon the prairie out of a vault of cloudless blue, and he felt that any faint shadow that might have arisen between him and the girl could be readily swept awy. He was a little less sure of this when he saw Agatha, who sat near an open window, in a scantily furnished match-boarded room. She had not slept at all. Her eyes were heavy, but there was a look of resolution in them which seemed out of place just then, and it struck him that she had lost the freshness which had been her distinguishing charm in England.

She rose when he came in, and then, to his astonishment, drew back a pace or two when he moved impulsively towards her.

"No," she said, with a hand raised restrainingly, "you must hear what I have to say, and try to bear with me. It is a little difficult, Gregory, but it must be said at once."

Gregory stood still, gazing at her with consternation in his face, and for a moment she looked steadily at him. It was a painful moment, for she was gifted with a clearness of vision which she almost longed to be delivered from. She saw that the impression which had brought her a vague sense of dismay on the previous afternoon was wrong. The trouble was that he had not changed at all. He was what he had always been, and she had merely deceived herself when she had permitted her girlish fancy to endow him with qualities and graces which he had never possessed. There was, however, no doubt that she had still a duty toward him.

He spoke first with a trace of hardness in his voice.

"Then," he rejoined, "won't you sit down? This is naturally a little—embarrassing—but I'll try to listen."

Agatha sank into a seat by the open window, for she felt physically worn out, and before her there was a task from which she shrank.

"Gregory," she began, "I feel that we have come near making what might prove to be a horrible mistake."

"We?" repeated Hawtrey, while the blood rose into his weather-darkened face. "That means both of us."

"Yes," asserted Agatha, with a steadiness that cost her an effort.

Hawtrey went a step nearer to her. "Do you want me to admit that I've made a mistake."

"Are you quite sure you haven't?"

She flung the question at him sharply with tense apprehension, for, after all, if Gregory was sure of himself, there was only one course open to her. He leaned upon the table, gazing at her, and as he studied her face his indignation melted, and doubts crept into his mind.

She looked weary, and grave, almost haggard, and it was a fresh, light-hearted girl with whom he had fallen in love in England. The mark of the last two years of struggle was plain on her. He tried to realize what he had looked for when he had asked her to marry him, and could not get a clear conception of his vision. In the back of his mind was a half-formulated idea that he had dreamed of a cheerful companion, somebody to amuse him. She scarcely seemed likely to be entertaining now.

Gregory was not a man who could face a crisis collectedly, and his thoughts became confused until one idea emerged from them. He had pledged himself to her, and the fact laid a certain obligation upon him. It was his part to overrule any fancies she might be disposed to indulge in.

"Well," he said stoutly, "I'm not going to admit anything of that kind. The journey has been too much for you. You haven't got over it yet." He lowered his voice, and his face softened. "Aggy, dear, I've waited four years for you."

His words stirred her, for they were certainly true, and his gentleness had also its effect. The situation was becoming more and more difficult, since it seemed impossible to make him understand that he would in all probability speedily tire of her. To make it clear that she could never be satisfied with him was a thing from which she shrank.

"How have you passed those four years?" she asked, to gain time.

For a moment his conscience smote him. He remembered the trips to Winnipeg, and the dances to which he had escorted Sally Creighton. It was, however, evident that Agatha could have heard nothing of Sally.

"I spent them in hard work. I wanted to make the place comfortable for you," he answered. "It is true" —and he added this with a twinge of uneasiness, as he remembered that his neighbors had done much more with less incentive—"that it's still very far from what I would like, but things have been against me."

The speech had a far stronger effect than he could have expected, for Agatha remembered Wyllard's dscription of what the prairie farmer had to face. Those four years of determined effort and patient endurance, as she pictured them, counted heavily against her in the man's favor. It flashed upon her that, after all, there might have been some warrant for the view that she had held of Gregory's character when he had fallen in love with her. He was younger then. There must have been latent possibilities in him, but the years of toil had killed them and hardened him. It was for her sake he had made the struggle, and now it seemed unthinkable that she should renounce him because he came to her with the dust and stain of it upon him. For all that, she was possessed with a feeling that she would involve them both in disaster if she yielded. Something warned her that she must stand firm.

"Gregory," she said, "I seem to know that we should both be sorry afterwards if I kept my promise."

Hawtrey straightened himself with a smile that she recognized. She had liked him for it once, for it had then suggested the joyous courage of untainted youth. Now, however, it struck her as merely hinting at empty, complacent assurance. She hated herself for the fancy, but it would not be driven away.

"Well," he replied, "I'm quite willing to face that hazard. I suppose this diffidence is only natural, Aggy, but it's a little hard on me."

"No," replied the girl with emphasis, "it's horribly unnatural, and that's why I'm afraid. I should have come to you gladly, without a misgiving, feeling that nothing could hurt me if I was with you. I wanted to do that, Gregory—I meant to—but I can't." Then her voice fell to a tone that had vibrant regret in it. "You should have made sure—you should have married me when you last came home."

"But I'd nowhere to take you. The farm was only half-broken prairie, the homestead almost unhabitable."

Agatha winced at this. It was, no doubt, true, but it seemed horribly petty and commonplace. His comprehension stopped at such details as these, and he had given her no credit for the courage which would have made light of bodily discomfort.

"Do you think that would have mattered? We were both very young then, and we could have faced our troubles and grown up together. Now we're not the same. You let me grow up alone."

Hawtrey shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't changed," he told her as she looked at him with deep-seeing eyes.

He contented himself with that, and Agatha grew more resolute. There was not a spark of imagination in him, scarcely even a spark of the passion which, if it had been strong enough, might have swept her away in spite of her shrinking. He was a man of comely presence, whimsical, and quick, as she remembered, at light badinage, but when there was a crisis to be grappled with he somehow failed. His graces were on the surface. There was no depth in him.

"Aggy," he added humbly, when he should have been dominant and forceful, "it is only a question of a little time. You will get used to me."

"Then," pleaded the girl, who clutched at the chance of respite, "give me six months from to-day. It isn't very much to ask, Gregory."

Gregory wrinkled his brows. "It's a great deal," he answered slowly. "I feel that we shall drift further and further apart if once I let you go."

"Then you feel that we have drifted a little already?"

"I don't know what has come over you, Aggy, but there has been a change. I'm what I was, and I want to keep you."

Agatha rose and turned towards him a white face. "If you are wise you will not urge me now," she said.

Hawtrey met her gaze for a moment, and then made a sign of acquiescence as he turned his eyes away. He recognized that this was a new Agatha, one whose will was stronger than his. Yet he was astonished that he had yielded so readily.

"Well," he agreed, "if it must be, I can only give way to you, but I must be free to come over here whenever I wish." Suddenly a thought struck him. "But you may have to go away," he added, with sudden concern. "If I am to wait six months, what are you to do in the meanwhile?"

Agatha smiled wearily. Now that the respite had been granted her, the question he had raised was not one that caused her any great concern.

"Oh," she answered, "we can think of that later. I have borne enough to-day. This has been a little hard upon me, Gregory."

"I don't think it has been particularly easy for either of us," returned Hawtrey, with grimness. "Anyway, it seems that I'm only distressing you." There was a baffled, puzzled look in his face. "Naturally, this is so unexpected that I don't know what to say. I'll come back when I feel I've grasped the situation."

Taking one of her hands, he stooped and kissed her cheek.

"My dear," he said, "I only want to make it as easy as I can. You'll try to think of me favorably."

He went out and left her sitting beside the open window. A warm breeze swept into the room; outside a blaze of sunshine rested on the prairie. The ground about the house was torn up with wheel ruts, for the wooden building rose abruptly without fence or garden from the waste of whitened grass. Close to the house stood a birch-log barn or stables, its sides curiously ridged and furrowed where the trunks were laid on one another. Further away rose a long building of sod, and a great shapeless yellow mound with a domed top towered behind it. It was most unlike a trim English rick, and Agatha wondered what it could be. As a matter of fact, it was a not uncommon form of granary, the straw from the last thrashing flung over a birch-pole framing. Behind it ran a great breadth of knee-high stubble, blazing ocher and cadmium in the sunlight. It had evidently extended further than it did, for a blackened space showed where a fire had been lighted to destroy it. In the big field Hastings was plowing. Clad in blue duck he plodded behind his horses, which stopped now and then when the share jarred against a patch of still frozen soil. Further on two other men, silhoueted in blue against the whitened grass, drove spans of slowly moving oxen that hauled big breaker plows, and the lines of clods that lengthened behind them gleamed in the sunlight a rich chocolate-brown. Beyond them the wilderness ran unbroken to the horizon.

Agatha gazed at it all vacantly, but the newness and strangeness of it reacted upon her. She felt very desolate and lonely, but she remembered that she must still grapple with a practical difficulty. She could not stay with Mrs. Hastings indefinitely, and she had not the least notion where to go or what she was to do. She was leaning back in her chair wearily with half-closed eyes when her hostess came in and looked at her with a smile that suggested comprehension. Mrs. Hastings was thin, and seemed a trifle worn, but she had shrewd, kindly eyes. She wore a plain print dress which was dusted here and there with flour.

"So you have sent him away!" she exclaimed.

It was borne in upon Agatha that she could be candid with this woman who had already guessed the truth.

"Yes," she replied, "for six months. That is, we are not to decide on anything until they have passed. I felt we must get used to each other. It seemed best."

"To you. Did it seem best to Gregory?"

A flush crept into Agatha's face. Though his acquiescence had been a relief to her, she felt that he might have made a more vigorous protest.

"He gave in to me," she answered.

Mrs. Hastings looked thoughtful. "Well," she observed, "I believe you were wise, but that opens up another question. What are you going to do in the meanwhile?"

"I don't know," confessed Agatha apathetically. "I suppose I shall have to go away—to Winnipeg, most probably. I could teach, I think."

"How are you and Gregory to get used to each other if you go away?"

Agatha made a helpless gesture. "I hadn't looked at it in that light."

"Are you very anxious to get used to him?"

Agatha shrank from the question; but there was a constraining kindliness in the older woman's eyes.

"I daren't quite think about it yet. I mean to try. I must try. I seem to be playing an utterly contemptible, selfish part, but I could not marry him—now!"

Mrs. Hastings crossed the room, and sat down by her side.

"My dear," she said, "as I told you, I think you are doing right, and I believe I know how you feel. Everybody prophesied disaster when I came out to join Allen from a sheltered home in Montreal, and at the beginning my life here was not easy to me. It was all so different, and there were times when I was afraid, and my heart was horribly heavy. If it hadn't been for Allen I think I should have given in and broken down. He understood, however. He never failed me."

Agatha's eyes grew misty, and she turned her head away.

"Yes," she replied, that would make it wonderfully easier."

"You must forgive me," apologized Mrs. Hastings. "I was tactless, but I didn't mean to hurt you. Well, one difficulty shouldn't give us very much trouble. Why shouldn't you stay here with me?"

Agatha turned towards her abruptly with a look of relief in her face, which faded quickly. She liked this woman, and she liked her husband, but she remembered that she had no claim on them.

"Oh," she declared, "it is out of the question."

"Wait a little. I'm proposing to give you quite as much as you will probably care to do. There are my two little girls to teach, and I think they have rather taken to you. I can scarcely find a minute for their lessons, and, as you have seen, there is a piano which has only a few of the keys broken. Besides, we have only one Scandinavian maid who smashes everything that isn't made of indurated fiber, and I'm afraid she'll marry one of the boys in a month or two. It was only by sending the kiddies to Brandon and getting Mrs. Creighton, a neighbor of ours, to look after Allen, who insisted on my going, that I was able to get to Paris with some Montreal friends. In any case, you'd have no end of duties."

"You are doing this out of—charity!"

Mrs. Hastings laughed. "A week or two ago, Allen wrote to some friends of his in Winnipeg asking them to send me anybody."

The girl's eyes shone mistily. "Oh!" she cried, "you have lifted one weight off my mind."

"I think," observed Mrs. Hastings, "the others will also be removed in due time."

After that she talked cheerfully of other matters, and Agatha listened to her with a vague wonder at her own good fortune in falling in with such a friend.

There are in that country many men and women who are unfettered by conventions. They stretch out an open hand to the stranger and the outcast. Toil has brought them charity in place of hardness, and still retaining, as some of them do, the culture of the cities, they have outgrown all the petty bonds of caste. The wheat-grower and the hired-man eat together. Rights are good-humoredly conceded in place of being fought for, and the sense of grievance and half-veiled suspicion common elsewhere among employes are exchanged for an efficient co-operation. It must, however, be admitted that there are also farmers of another kind, from whom the hired man has occasionally some difficulty in extracting his covenanted wages by personal violence.

The two women had been talking a long time when a team and a jolting wagon swept into sight, and Mrs. Hastings rose as the man who drove pulled up his horses.

"It's Sproatly; I wonder what has brought him here," she remarked.

The man sprang down from the wagon and walked towards the house. She gazed at him almost incredulously.

"He's quite smart," she added. "I don't see a single patch on that jacket, and he has positively got his hair cut."

"Is that an unusual thing in Mr. Sproatly's case?" Agatha inquired.

"Yes," said Mrs. Hastings. "It's very unusual indeed. What is stranger still, he has taken the old grease-spotted band off his hat, after clinging to it affectionately for the last twelve months."

Agatha thought that the soft hat, which fell shapelessly over part of Sproatly's face, needed something to replace the discarded band; but in another moment he entered the room. He shook hands with them both.

"You are looking remarkably fresh, but appearances are not invariably to be depended on, and it's advisable to keep the system up to par," he said with a smile. "I suppose you don't want a tonic of any kind?"

"I don't," declared Mrs. Hastings resolutely; "Allen doesn't, either. Besides, didn't you get into some trouble over that tonic?"

"It was the cough cure," explained Sproatly with a grin.

"I sold a man at Lander's one of the large-sized bottles, and when he had taken some he felt a good deal better. Then he seems to have argued the thing out like this: if one dose had relieved the cough, a dozen should drive it out of him altogether, and he took the lot. He slept for forty-eight hours afterward, and when I came across him at the settlement he attacked me with a club. The fault, I may point out, was in his logic. Perhaps you would like some pictures. I've a rather striking oleograph of the Kaiser. It must be like him, for two of his subjects recognized it. One hung it up in his shanty; the other asked me to hold it out, and then pitched a stove billet through the middle of it. He, however, produced his dollar; he said he felt so much better after what he'd done that he didn't grudge it."

"I'm afraid we're not worth powder and shot," said Mrs. Hastings. "Do you ever remember our buying any tonics or pictures from you?"

"I don't, though I have felt that you ought to have done it." Sproatly, who paused a moment, turned towards Agatha with a little whimsical bow. "The professional badinage of an unlicensed dealer in patent medicines may now and then mercifully cover a good deal of embarrassment. Miss Ismay has brought something pleasantly characteristic of the Old Country along with her."

His hostess disregarded the last remark. "Then if you didn't expect to sell us anything, what did you come for?"

"For supper," answered Sproatly cheerfully. "Besides that, to take Miss Rawlinson out for a drive. I told her last night it would afford me considerable pleasure to show her the prairie. We could go round by Lander's and back."

"Then you will probably come across her somewhere about the straw-pile with the kiddies."

Sproatly took the hint, and when he went out Mrs. Hastings laughed.

"You would hardly suppose that was a young man of excellent education!" she exclaimed. "So it's on Winifred's account he has driven over; at first I fancied it was on yours."

Agatha was astonished, but she smiled. "If Winifred favors him with her views about young men he will probably be rather sorry for himself. He lives near you?"

"No," said Mrs. Hastings. "In the summer he lives in his wagon, or under it, I don't know which. Of course, if he's really taken with Winifred he will have to alter that."

"But he has only seen her once—you can't mean that he is serious."

"I really can't speak for Sproatly, but it would be quite in keeping with the customs of the country if he was."

A minute or two later Agatha saw Winifred in the wagon when it reappeared from behind the straw-pile, and Mrs. Hastings turned toward the window.

"She has gone with him," she commented significantly. "Unfortunately, he has taken my kiddies too. If he brings them back with no bones broken it will be a relief to me."

CHAPTER XII

WANDERERS

Agatha had spent a month with Mrs. Hastings. When they were driving over to Wyllard's homestead one afternoon, the older woman pulled up her team while they were still some little distance away from their destination, and looked about her with evident interest. On the one hand, a vast breadth of torn-up loam ran back across the prairie, which was now faintly flecked with green. On the other, plowing teams were scattered here and there across the tussocky sod, and long lines of clods that flashed where the sunlight struck their facets trailed out behind them. The great sweep of grasses that rustled joyously before a glorious warm wind, gleamed luminously, and overhead hung a vault of blue without a cloud in it. Trailing out across it, flocks of birds moved up from the south.

"Harry is sowing a very big crop this year, and most of it on fall back-set," she observed. "He has, however, horses enough to do that kind of thing, and, of course, he does it thoroughly." She glanced toward the place where the teams were hauling unusually heavy plows through the grassy sod. "This is virgin prairie that he's breaking, and he'll probably put oats on it. They ripen quicker. He ought to be a rich man after harvest unless the frost comes, or the market goes against him. Some of his neighbors, including my husband, would have sown a little less and held a reserve in hand."

Agatha remembered what Wyllard had told her one night on board the *Scarrowmania,* and smiled, for she fancied that she understood the man. He was not one to hedge, as she had heard it called, or cautiously hold his hand. He staked boldly, but she felt that this was not only for the sake of the money that he might hope to gain. It was part of his nature—the result of an optimistic faith or courage that appealed to her, and sheer love of effort. She also guessed that his was not a spasmodic, impulsive activity. She could imagine him holding on as steadfastly with everything against him, exacting all that men and teams and machines could do. It struck her as curious that she should feel so sure of this; but she admitted that it was the case.

Sitting in the driving-seat of a big machine that ripped broad furrows through the crackling sod, he was approaching them. Four horses plodded wearily in front of the giant plow until he thrust one hand over, and there was a rattle and clanking as he swung them and the machine around beside the wagon. Then he got down, and stood smiling up at Agatha with his soft hat in his hand and the sunlight falling full upon his weather-darkened face. It was not a particularly striking face, but there was something in it, a hint of restrained force and steadfastness, she thought, which Gregory's did not possess, and for a moment or two she watched him covertly.

He wore an old blue shirt, open at the throat and belted into trousers of blue duck, and she noticed the fine symmetry of his spare figure. The absence of any superfluous flesh struck her as in keeping with her view of his character. The man was well-endowed physically; but apart from the strong vitality that was expressed in every line of his pose he looked clean, as she vaguely described it to herself. There was an indefinable something about him that was apparently born of a simple, healthful life spent in determined labor in the open air. It became plainer, as she remembered other men upon whom the mark of the beast was unmistakably set. Mrs. Hastings broke the silence.

"Well," she said, "we have driven over as we promised. I've no doubt you will give us supper, but we'll go on and sit with Mrs. Nansen in the meanwhile. I expect you're too busy to talk to us."

Wyllard laughed, and it occurred to Agatha that his laugh was wholesome as well as pleasant.

"I generally am busy," he admitted. "These horses have been at it since sun-up, and they're rather played out now. I'll talk to you as long as you will let me after supper, which will soon be ready."

Agatha noticed that though the near horse's coat was foul with dust and sweat he laid his brown hand upon it, and it seemed to her that the gentleness with which he did it was very suggestive.

Mrs. Hastings, who had been scrutinizing the field, asked, "What's to be the result of all this plowing if we have harvest frost or the market goes against you?"

"Quite a big deficit," answered Wyllard cheerfully.

"And that doesn't cause you any anxiety?"

"I'll have had some amusement for my money."

Mrs. Hastings turned to Agatha. "He calls working from sunrise until it's dark, and afterwards now and then, amusement!" She looked back at Wyllard. "I believe it isn't quite easy for you to hold your back as straight as you are doing, and that off-horse certainly looks as if it wanted to lie down."

Wyllard laughed. "It won't until after supper, anyway. There are two more rows of furrows still to do."

"I suppose that is a hint!" Mrs. Hastings glanced at Agatha when the wagon jolted on.

"That man," she said, "is a great favorite of mine. For one thing, he's fastidious, though he's fortunately very far from perfect in some respects. He has a red-hot temper, which now and then runs away with him."

"What do you mean by fastidious?"

"It's a little difficult to define, but I certainly don't mean pernicketty. Of course, there is a fastidiousness which makes one shrink from unpleasant things, but Harry's is the other kind. It impels him to do them every now and then."

Agatha made no answer. She was uneasily conscious that it might not be advisable to think too much about this man, and in another minute or two they reached the homestead. The house was a plain frame building that had grown out of an older and smaller one of logs, part of which remained. It was much the same with the barns and stables, for, while they were stoutly built of framed timber or logs, one end of most of them was lower than the rest, and in some cases consisted of poles and sods. Even to her untrained eyes all she saw suggested order, neatness, and efficiency. The whole was flanked and sheltered by a big birch bluff, in which trunks and branches showed through a thin green haze of tiny opening leaves.

A man whom Wyllard had sent after them took the horses.

Agatha commented on what she called the added-to look of the buildings.

"The Range," said Mrs. Hastings, "has grown rapidly since Harry took hold. The old part represents the high-water mark of his father's efforts. Of course," she added reflectively, "Harry has had command of some capital since a relative of his died, but I never thought that explained everything."

They entered the house, and a gray-haired Swedish woman led them through several match-boarded rooms into a big, cool hall. She left them there for a while, and Agatha was absorbed for a minute or two with her impressions of the house. It was singularly empty by comparison with the few English homesteads that she had seen. There were no curtains nor carpets nor hangings of any kind, but it was commodious and comfortable.

"What can a bachelor want with a place like this?" she asked.

"I don't know," answered Mrs. Hastings; "perhaps it's Harry's idea of having everything proportionate. The Range is quite a big, and generally a prosperous, farm. Besides, it's likely that he doesn't contemplate remaining a bachelor forever. Indeed, Allen and I sometimes wonder how he has escaped marriage for so long."

"Is 'escaped' the right word?" Agatha asked.

"It is," asserted Mrs. Hastings with a laugh. "You see, he's highly eligible from our point of view, but at the same time he's apparently invulnerable. I believe," she added dryly, "that's the right word, too."

The Swedish housekeeper appeared again and they talked with her until she went to bring in the six o'clock supper. Soon after the table was laid Wyllard and the men came in. Wyllard was attired as when Agatha had last seen him, except that he had put on a coat. He led his guests to the head of the long table, but the men—there were a number of them—sat below, and evidently had no diffidence about addressing question or comment to their employer.

The men ate with a voracious haste, but that appeared to be the custom of the country, and Agatha could find no great fault with their manners or conversation. The talk was, for the most part, quaintly witty, and some of the men used what struck her as remarkably fitting and original similes. Indeed, as the meal proceeded, she became curiously interested.

The windows were open wide, and a sweet, warm air swept into the barely furnished room. The spaciousness of the room impressed her, and she was pleased with the evident unity of these brown-faced, strong-armed toilers with their leader. At the head of the table he sat, self-contained, but courteous and responsive to all alike, and though they were in an essentially democratic country, she felt that there was something almost feudal in the relations between him and his men. She could not imagine them to be confined to the mere exaction of so much labor and the expectation of payment of wages due. She was pleased that he had not changed his clothing.

So strong was Agatha's interest that she was surprised when the meal was finished. Afterward, she and Mrs. Hastings talked with the housekeeper for a while, and an hour had slipped away when Wyllard suggested that he should show her the slough beyond the bluff.

"It's the nearest approach to a lake we have until you get to the alkali tract," he said.

Agatha went with him through the shadow of the wood, and when they came out among the trees he found her a seat upon a fallen birch. The house and plowing were hidden now, and they were alone on the slope to a slight hollow, in which half a mile of gleaming water lay. Its surface was broken here and there by tussocks of grass and reeds, and beyond it the prairie ran back unbroken, a dim gray waste, to the horizon. The sun had dipped behind the bluff, and the sky had become a vast green transparency. There was no wind now, but a wonderful exhilarating freshness crept into the cooling air, and the stillness was broken only by the clamor of startled wild-fowl which Agatha could see paddling in clusters about the gleaming slough.

"Those are ducks—wild ones?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Wyllard; "ducks of various kinds. Most of them the same as your English ones."

"Do you shoot them?"

Agatha was not greatly interested, but he seemed disposed to silence, and she felt, for no very clear reason, that it was advisable to talk of something.

"No," he said, "not often, anyway. If Mrs. Nansen wants a couple I crawl down to the long grass with the rifle and get them for her."

"The rifle? Doesn't the big bullet destroy them?"

"No," returned Wyllard. "You have to shoot their head off or cut their neck in two."

"You can do that—when they're right out in the slough?" asked Agatha, who had learned that it is much more difficult to shoot with a rifle than a shotgun, which spreads its charge.

Wyllard smiled. "Generally; that is, if I haven't been doing much just before. It depends upon one's hands. We have our game laws, but as a rule nobody worries about them, and, anyway, those birds won't nest until they reach the tundra by the Polar Sea. Still, as I said, we never shoot them unless Mrs. Nansen wants one or two for the pot."

"Why?"

"I don't quite know. For one thing, they're worn out; they just stop here to rest."

His answer appealed to the girl. It did not seem strange to her that the love of the lower creation should be strong in this man, who had no hesitation in admitting that the game laws were no restraint to him. When these Lesser Brethren, worn with their journey, sailed down out of the blue heavens, he believed in giving them right of sanctuary.

"They have come a long way?" she asked.

Wyllard pointed towards the south. "From Florida, Cuba, Yucatan; further than that, perhaps. In a day or two they'll push on again toward the Pole, and others will take their places. There's a further detachment arriving now."

Looking up, Agatha saw a straggling wedge of birds dotted in dusky specks against the vault of transcendental blue. The wedge coalesced, drew out again, and dropped swiftly, and the air was filled with the rush of wings; then there was a harsh crying and splashing, and she heard the troubled water lap among the reeds until deep silence closed in upon the slough again.

"The migrating instinct is strangely interesting," she said.

A curious look crept into Wyllard's eyes.

"It gives the poor birds a sad destiny, I think; they're wanderers and strangers without a habitation; there's unrest in them. After a few months on the tundra mosses to gather strength and teach the young to fly, they'll unfold their wings to beat another passage before the icy gales. Some of us, I think, are like them!"

Agatha could not avoid the personal application.

"You surely don't apply that to yourself," she said. "You certainly have a habitation—the finest, isn't it, on this part of the prairie?"

"Yes," answered Wyllard slowly; "I suppose it is. I've now had a little rest and quietness too."

His last remark did not appear to call for an answer, and Agatha sat silent.

"Still," he went on reflectively, "I have a feeling that some day the call will come, and I shall have to take the trail again." He paused, and looked at her before he added, "It would be easier if one hadn't to go alone, or, since that would be necessary, if one had at least something to come back to when the journey was done."

"Must you heed the call?" asked Agatha, who was puzzled by his steady gaze.

"Yes," he said with gravity, "the call will come from the icy North if it ever comes at all."

There was another brief silence. Agatha wondered what he was thinking of, but he soon told her.

"I remember how I came back from there last time," he said. "We were rather late that season, and out of our usual beat when the gale broke upon us in the gateway of the Pole, between Alaska and Asia. We ran before it with a strip of the boom-foresail on one vessel and a jib that blew to ribands every now and then. The schooner was small, ninety tons or so, and for a week she scudded with the gray seas tumbling after her, white-topped, out of the snow and spume. The waves ranged high above her taffrail, curling horribly, but one did not want to look at them. The one man on deck had a line about him, and he looked ahead, watching the vessel screwing round with hove-up bows as she climbed the seas. If he'd let her fall off or claw up, the next wave would have made an end of her. He was knee-deep half the time in icy brine, and his hands had split and opened with the frost, but the sweat dripped from him as he clung to the jarring wheel. The helmsmen had another trouble which preyed on them. They were thinking of the three men they had left behind.

"Well," he added, "we ran out of the gale, and I had bitter words to face when we reached Vancouver. As one result of the trouble I walked out of the city with four or five dollars in my pocket—though there was a share due to me. Then in an open car I rode up into the ranges to mend railroad bridges in the frost and snow. It was not the kind of home-coming one would care to look forward to."

"Ah!" Agatha cried with a shudder, "it must have been horribly dreary."

The man met her eyes. "Yes, he said, "you—know. You came here from far away, I think a little weary, too, and something failed you. Then you felt yourself adrift. There were—it seemed—only strangers around you, but you were wrong in one respect; you were by no means a stranger to me."

He had been leaning against a birch trunk, but now he moved a little nearer, and stood gravely looking down on her.

"You have sent Gregory away?" he questioned.

"Yes," answered Agatha, and, startled, as she was, it did not occur to her that the mere admission was misleading.

Wyllard stretched out his hands. "Then won't you come to me?"

The blood swept into the girl's face. For the moment she forgot Gregory, and was conscious only of an unreasoning impulse which prompted her to take the hands held out to her. She rose and faced Wyllard with burning cheeks.

"You know nothing of me," she said. "Can you think that I would let you take me out of charity?"

"Again you're wrong—on both points. As I once told you, I have sat for hours beside the fire beneath the pines or among the boulders with your picture for company. When I was worn out and despondent you encouraged me. You have been with me high up in the snow on the ranges, and through leagues of shadowy bush. That is not all. There were times when, as we drove the branch line up the gorge beneath the big divide, all one's nature shrank from the monotony of brutal labor. The paydays came around, and opportunities were made for us to forget what we had borne, and had still to bear. Then you laid a restraining hand on me. I could not take your picture where you could not go. Is all that to count for nothing?"

He held out his arms to her. "As to the other question, can you get beyond the narrow point of view? We're in a big, new country where the old barriers are down. We're merely flesh and blood—red blood—and we speak as we feel. Admitting that I was sorry for you—I am—how does that tell against me—or you? There's one thing only that counts at all—I want you."

Agatha was stirred with an emotion that made her heart beat wildly. He had spoken with a force and passion that had nearly swept her away with it. The vigor of the new land throbbed in his voice, and, flinging aside all cramping restraints and conventions, he had claimed her as primitive man claimed primitive woman. Her whole being responded to his love and Gregory faded out of her mind; but there was, after all, pride in her, and she could not quite bring herself to look at life from his point of view. All her prejudices and her traditions were opposed to it. He had made a mistake when he had admitted that he was sorry for her. She did not want his compassion, and she shrank from the thought that she would marry him—for shelter. It brought to her a sudden, shameful confusion as she remembered the haste with which marriages were arranged on the prairie. Then, as the first unreasoning impulse which had almost compelled her to yield to him passed away, she reflected that it was scarcely two months since she had met him in England. It was intolerable that he should think that she would be willing to fall into his arms merely because he had held them out to her.

"It is a little difficult to get beyond one's sense of what is fit," she said. "You—I must say again—can't know anything about me. You have woven fancies about that photograph, but you must recognize that I'm not the girl you have created out of your reveries. In all probability she is wholly unreal, unnatural, visionary." Agatha contrived to smile, for she was recovering her composure. "Perhaps it is easy when one has imagination to endow a person with qualities and graces that could never belong to them. It must be easy"—though she was unconscious of it, there was a trace of bitterness in her voice—"because I know I could do it myself."

Again the man held out his arms. "Then," he said simply, "won't you try? If you can only feel sure that the person has the qualities you admire it is possible that he could acquire one or two."

Agatha drew back. "And I've changed ever so much since that photograph was taken!" she exclaimed with a catch in her voice.

Wyllard admitted it. "Yes," he said, "I recognized that; you were a little immature then. I know that now—but all the graciousness and sweetness in you has grown and ripened. What is more, you have grown just as I seemed to know you would. I saw that clearly the day we met beside the stepping-stones. I would have asked you to marry me in England, only Gregory stood in the way."

The color ebbed suddenly out of the girl's face as she remembered.

"Gregory," she declared in a strained voice, "stands in the way still. I didn't send him away altogether. I'm not sure I made that clear."

Wyllard stood very still for a moment or two.

"I wonder," he said, "if there's anything significant in the fact that you gave me that reason last. He failed you in some way?"

"I'm not sure that I haven't failed him; but I can't go into that."

Again Wyllard stood silent. Then he turned to her with a strong restraint in his face.

"Gregory is a friend of mine," he said, "there is, at least, one very good reason why I should remember it, but it seems that somehow he hadn't the wit to keep you. Well, I can only wait, but when the time seems ripe I shall ask you again. Until then you have my promise that I will not say another word that could distress you. Perhaps I had better take you back to Mrs. Hastings now."

Agatha turned away, and they walked back together silently.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SUMMONS

Mrs. Hastings was standing beside her wagon in the gathering dusk when Agatha and Wyllard joined her. After Wyllard had helped the two women into the vehicle she looked down at him severely as she gathered up the reins.

"By this time Allen will have had to put the kiddies to bed," she said. "Christina, as you might have borne in mind, goes over to Branstock's every evening. Anyway, you'll drive across and see him about that team as soon as you can; come to supper."

"I'll try," promised Wyllard with a certain hesitation. Mrs. Hastings turned to Agatha as they drove away.

"Why did he look at you before he answered me?" she asked, and laughed, for there was just light enough left to show the color in the girl's cheek. "Well," she added, "I told Allen he was sure to be the first."

Agatha looked at her in evident bewilderment, but she nodded. "Yes," she said, "of course, I knew it would come. Everybody knows by now that you have fallen out with Gregory."

"But, as I told you, I haven't fallen out with him."

"You certainly haven't married him, and if you have said 'No' to Harry Wyllard because you would sooner take Gregory after all, you're a singularly unwise young woman. Anyway, you'll have to meet Harry when he comes to supper. Allen's fond of a talk with him; I can't have him kept away."

"I was a little afraid of that," replied Agatha slowly. "What makes the situation more difficult is that he told me he would ask me again."

Mrs. Hastings was thoughtful for a moment. "In that case he will in all probability do it; but I don't think you need feel diffident about meeting him, especially as you can't help it. He'll wait and say nothing until he considers it advisable."

She changed the subject, and talked about other matters until they reached the homestead.

As the weeks went by Agatha found that what Mrs. Hamilton had told her was warranted. Wyllard drove over every now and then, but she was reassured by his attitude. He greeted her with the quiet cordiality which had hitherto characterized him, and it went a long way towards allaying the embarrassment of which she was conscious at first. By and by, however, she felt no embarrassment at all, in spite of the disturbing possibility that he might at some future time once more adopt the rôle of lover.

In the meanwhile, she realized that despite the efforts she made to think of him tenderly she was drifting further apart from Gregory. She had two other offers of marriage before the wheat had shot up a hand's breadth above the rich black loam. This was a matter of regret to her, and, though Mrs. Hastings assured her that the "boys" would get over it, she was rather shocked to hear that one of them had shortly afterwards involved himself in difficulties by creating a disturbance in Winnipeg.

The wheat, however, was growing tall when, at Mrs. Hastings' request, Agatha drove over to Willow Range. Wyllard was out when they reached the homestead, and leaving Mrs. Hastings and his housekeeper together, the girl wandered out into the open air. She went through the birch bluff and towards the slough, which had almost dried up now, and it was with a curious stirring of confused feelings that she remembered what Wyllard had said to her there. Through all her thoughts ran a regret that she had not met him four years earlier.

Regrets, however, were useless, and in order to get rid of them she walked more briskly up a low rise of ground where the grass was already turning white again, over the crest of the hill, and down the side to another hollow. The prairie rolled in wide undulations as the sea does when the swell of a distant gale underruns a glassy calm. Agatha had grown fond of the prairie. Its clear skies and fresh breezes had brought the color to her cheeks and given her composure, though there were times when the knowledge that she was no nearer a decision in regard to Gregory weighed heavily upon her. She had seen very little of him and he had not been effusive then. She could not guess what his feelings might be, but it had been a relief to her when he had ridden away from the home of the Hastingses. For a while after she saw him he faded to an unsubstantial, shadowy figure in the back of her mind.

On this afternoon when Agatha tried to put out of her mind the disturbing reflections that came to her as she walked, the prairie stretched away before her, gleaming in the sunlight under a vast sweep of cloudless blue. She was half-way down the long slope when a clash and tinkle reached her, and she noticed that a cloud of dust hung about the hollow where there had been another slough, which evidently had dried up weeks before. As men and horses were moving amid the dust she supposed that they were cutting prairie hay, which grows longer in such places than it does upon the levels. She went on another half-mile, and then sat down, for she had walked farther than she had intended to go. She could now see the men more clearly, and, though it was fiercely hot, they were evidently working at high pressure. Their blue duck clothing and bare brown arms appeared among the white and ocher tinting of the grass that seemed charged with brightness, and the sounds of their activity came up to her. She could distinguish the clashing tinkle of the mowers, the crackle of the harsh stems, and the rattle of wagon wheels.

A great mound of gleaming grass, overhanging two half-seen horses, moved out of the slough, and she watched it draw nearer until she made out Wyllard sitting in the front of it. She sat still until he pulled the team up close beside her and looked down with a smile.

"It's almost two miles to the homestead. If you could manage to climb up I could make you a comfortable place," he said.

Agatha held her hands up with one foot upon a spoke of the wheels as Wyllard leaned down, and next moment she was lifted upwards. She felt his supporting hand upon her waist. Then she found herself standing upon a narrow ledge, clutching at the hay while he tore out several big armfuls of it and flung it back upon the top of the load.

"Now," he announced, "I guess you'll find that a snug enough nest."

She sank into it with a sense of physical satisfaction. The grass was soft and warm; it was scented with the aromatic odors of wild peppermint, and it yielded like a downy cushion beneath her limbs. Still, she was just a little uneasy in mind, for she fancied that she had seen a sudden sign of feeling in Wyllard's face when he had held her for a moment on the ledge of the wagon. She glanced at him and was reassured. He was looking

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straight before him with unwavering eyes, and his face was set and quiet. Neither of them spoke until the team moved on. Then he turned to her.

"You won't be jolted much," he assured her. "They've been at it since four o'clock this morning."

"That," replied Agatha, "must mean that you rose at three."

Wyllard smiled. "As a matter of fact, it was half-past two. There was no dew last night, and we started early. I've several extra teams this year, and there's a good deal of hay to cut. Of course, we have to get it in the sloughs or any damp place where it's long. We don't sow grass, and we have no meadows like those there are in England."

Agatha understood that he meant to talk about matters of no particular consequence, as he usually did. She had noticed a vein of poetic imagination in him, and his idea that she had been with him through the snow of the lonely ranges and the gloom of the great forests of the Pacific slope appealed to her. Since the day when he told her that he loved her he had spoken only of commonplace subjects. Sitting close beside him in the hay she decided to let him talk about his farm, while she listened half-absently.

"But you have a foreman who could see the teams turned out, haven't you?" she asked, going back to the subject of his early rising.

"I had, but he left me three or four days ago. It's a pity, since I've taken up rather more than I can handle this year."

"Then why didn't you keep him?"

"Martial was a little mulish, and I'm afraid I'm troubled with a shortness of temper now and then. We had a difference of opinion as to the best way to drive the mower into the slough, and he didn't seem to recognize that he should have deferred to me. Unfortunately, as the boys were standing by, I had to insist upon his getting out of the saddle."

He had turned a little further towards her, and Agatha noticed that there was a bruise upon one side of his face. After what he had just told her the sight of it jarred upon her, though she would not admit that there was any reason why it should. She could not deny that on the prairie a resort to physical force might be warranted by the lack of any other remedy, but it hurt her to think of him as descending to an open brawl with one of his men.

Then it occurred to her that the other man in all probability had suffered more, and this brought her a certain sense of satisfaction which she admitted was more or less barbarous. She had made it clear that Wyllard was nothing to her, but she could not help watching him as he lay back against the hay. His wide hat set off his bronzed face, which, though not exactly handsome, was pleasant and reassuring. The dusty shirt and old blue trousers accentuated the long, clean lines of his figure, and she realized with a faint sense of anger that his mere physical perfection, his strength and suppleness, stirred her heart. She recognized a feeling to be judiciously checked. After all, in spite of her denial of it, she was endowed with power to love as women close to nature love, with an emotion all-encompassing and not subject to cold reasoning.

They talked of trifles of no great consequence, for both of them were conscious of the necessity for a certain reticence; and when they reached the homestead Agatha joined Mrs. Hastings, while Wyllard pitched the hay off the wagon. He same in to supper presently with about half of his men, and they all sat down together in the long, barely furnished room. Wyllard was unusually animated. He drew Mrs. Hastings into a bout of whimsical badinage, which was interrupted when a beat of hoofs rose from the prairie.

"Somebody's riding in; I wonder what he wants," remarked Wyllard. "I certainly don't expect anybody."

The drumming of hoofs rang more sharply through the open windows, for the sod was hard and dry. It stopped suddenly and Agatha saw Wyllard start as a man came into the room. He was a little, thick-set man with a seamed and tanned face. He was dressed in rather old blue serge, and he walked as if he were a seaman.

The stranger stood still, looking about him, and Wyllard's lips set tight. A thrill of apprehension ran through Agatha, for she felt that she knew what this stranger's errand must be.

Wyllard rose and walked towards the man with outstretched hand.

"Sit right down and have some supper. You'll want it if you have ridden in from the railroad," he said. "We'll talk afterwards."

The stranger nodded. "I'm from Vancouver," he announced, "had quite a lot of trouble tracing you."

He sat down, and Wyllard, who sent a man out to take the newcomer's horse, went back to his seat, but he was very quiet during the remainder of the meal. When supper was finished he asked Mrs. Hastings to excuse him, and leading the stranger into a smaller room, pulled out two chairs and laid a cigar on the table.

"Now you can get ahead," he said laconically.

The seaman fumbled in his pocket, and taking out a slip of wood handed it to his companion.

"That's what I came to bring you," he remarked.

Wyllard's eyes grew grave as he gazed at the thing. It was a slip of willow which grows close up to the limits of eternal ice, and it bore a rude representation of the British ensign union down, which signifies "In distress." Besides this there were one or two indecipherable words scratched on it, and three common names rather more clearly cut. Wyllard recognized every one of them.

"How did you get it?" he asked, in tense suspense.

The seaman once more felt in his pocket and took out a piece of paper cut from a chart. He flattened the paper out on the table, and it showed, as Wyllard had expected, a strip of the Kamtchatkan coast.

"I guess I needn't tell you where that is," the seaman said, as he pointed to the parallel of latitude that ran across it. "Dunton gave it to me. He was up there late last season well over on the western side. A northeasterly gale fell on them, and took most of the foremast out of their ship. I understand they tried to lash on a boom or something as a jury mast, but it hadn't height enough to set much forward canvas, and that being the case she wouldn't bear more than a three-reefed mainsail. Anyway, they couldn't do anything with her on the wind, and as it kept heading them from the east she sidled away down south through the Kuriles into the Yellow Sea. They got ice-bound somewhere, which explains why Dunton fetched Vancouver only a week ago."

"But the message?"

"When they were in the thick of their troubles they hove to not far off the icy beach, and a Husky came down on them in some kind of boat."

"A Husky?" repeated Wyllard, who knew the seaman meant an Esquimau.

"That's what Dunton called him, but I guess he must have been a Kamtchadale or a Koriak. Anyway, he brought this strip of willow, and he had Tom Lewson's watch. Dunton traded him something for it. They couldn't make much of what he said except that he'd got the message from three white men somewhere along the beach. They couldn't make out how long ago."

"Dunton tried for them?"

"How could he? His vessel would hardly look at the wind, and the ice was piling up on the coast close to lee of him. He hung on a week or two with the floes driving in all the while, and then it freshened hard and blew him out."

The stranger had told his story, and Wyllard, who rose with a quick gesture of deep anxiety, stood leaning on his chairback. His face was grave.

"That," he said, "must have been eight or nine months ago."

"It was. They've been up there since the night we couldn't pick up the boat."

"It's unthinkable," declared Wyllard. "The thing can't be true."

The seaman gravely produced a little common metal watch made in Connecticut, and worth five or six dollars. Opening it, he pointed to a name scratched inside it.

"You can't get over that," he said simply.

Wyllard strode up and down the room. When he sat down again with a clenched hand laid upon the table he and the seaman looked at each other steadily for a moment or two. Then the stranger made a significant gesture.

"You sent them," he said, "what are you going to do?"

"I'm going for them."

The sailor smiled. "I knew it would be that. You'll have to start right away if it's to be done this year. I've my eye upon a schooner."

He lighted a cigar, and settled himself more comfortably in his chair. "Well," he answered, "I'm going with you, but you'll have to buy my ticket to Vancouver. It cleaned me out to get here. We'd a difficulty with a blame gunboat last season, and the boss went back on me. Sealing's not what is used to be. Anyway, we can fix the thing up later. I won't keep you from your friends."

Wyllard left the sailor and though he did not find Mrs. Hastings immediately, he came upon Agatha sitting outside the house. She glanced at his face when he sat down beside her.

"Ah," she said, "you have had the summons."

Wyllard nodded. "Yes," he replied, "that man was the skipper of a schooner I once sailed in. He has come to tell me where those three men are."

He told her what he had heard, and the girl was conscious of mingled admiration and fear, the fear of losing him from her everyday life.

"You are going up there to search for them?" she asked. "Won't it cost you a great deal?"

She saw his face harden as he gazed at the tall wheat, but his expression was resolute.

"Yes," he admitted, "that's a sure thing. Most of my money is locked up in this crop, and there's need of constant watchfulness and effort until the last bushel's hauled in to the elevators. It probably sounds egotistical, but now I've got rid of Martial I can't put my hand on any one as fit to see the thing through as I am. Still, I have to go without delay. What else could I do?"

"Wouldn't the Provincial Government of British Columbia or your authorities at Ottawa take the matter up?"

Wyllard shook his head. "It wouldn't be wise to give them an opportunity. For one thing, they've had enough of sealing cases, and that isn't astonishing. We'll say they applied for the persons of three British subjects who are supposed to be living somewhere in Russian Asia—and for that matter I couldn't be sure that two of them aren't Americans—the Russians naturally inquire what the men were doing there. The answer is that they were poaching for the Russians' seals. Then the affair on the beach comes up, and there's a big claim for compensation and trouble all round. It seems to me the last thing those men—they're practically outlaws—would desire would be to have a Russian expedition sent up on their trail. They would want to lie hidden until they could somehow get off again."

"But how have they lived up there? The whole land is frozen, isn't it, most of the year?" she questioned.

"They had sealing rifles, and the Koriaks make out farther north in their roofed-in pits. One can live on seal and walrus meat and blubber."

Agatha shivered. "But they had no tents, nor furs, nor blankets. It's horrible to imagine it."

"Yes," agreed Wyliard gravely; "that's why I'm going for them."

Agatha sat still a moment. She could realize the magnitude of the sacrifice that he was making, and in some degree the hazards that he must face. It appealed to her with an overwhelming force, but she was also conscious of a strange dismay. She turned to him with a flush of color in her cheeks and her eyes shining.

"Oh," she said, "it's splendid."

Wyllard smiled. "What could I do?" he said, "I sent them."

CHAPTER XIV

AGATHA PROVES OBDURATE

It was two days later when Agatha, coming back from a stroll across the prairie with the two little girls, found Mrs. Hastings awaiting her at the homestead door.

"I'll take the kiddies. Harry Wyllard's here, and he seems quite anxious to see you, though I don't know what he wants," she said.

She flashed a searching glance at the girl, whose face, however, remained impassive. It was not often that Agatha's composure broke down.

"Don't wait," she added, "you had better go in this minute. Allen has been arguing with him the last half-hour, and can't get any sense into him. It seems to me the man's crazy; but he might, perhaps, listen to you."

"I think that is scarcely likely," replied Agatha.

Mrs. Hastings made a sign of impatience. "Then," she rejoined, "it's a pity. Anyway, if he speaks to you about his project you can tell him that it's altogether unreasonable."

She drew aside, and Agatha walked into the room in which she had had her painful interview with Gregory. Wyllard, who rose as she came in, stood quietly watching her.

"Nellie Hastings or her husband has been telling you what they think of my idea?" he said questioningly.

"Yes," Agatha answered. "Their opinion evidently hasn't much weight with you."

"Haven't you a message for me?" he asked. "You were sent to denounce my folly—and you can't do it. If you trusted your own impulses you would give me your benediction instead." He smiled down at her.

Agatha, who was troubled with a sense of regret, saw a suggestive wistfulness in his face.

"No," she said slowly, "I can't denounce your folly, as they call your decision to go North. For one reason, I have no right of any kind to force my views on you."

"You told Mrs. Hastings that?"

It seemed an unwarranted question, but the girl admitted the truth frankly.

"In one sense I did. I suggested that there was no reason why you should listen to me."

Wyllard smiled again. "Nellie and her husband are good friends of mine, but sometimes our friends are a little too officious. Anyway, it doesn't count. If you had had that right, you would have told me to go."

Agatha felt the warm blood rise to her cheeks. It seemed to her that he had paid her a great and sincere compliment in taking it for granted that if she had loved him she would still have bidden him undertake his perilous duty.

"Ah," she said, "I don't know. Perhaps I should not have been brave enough."

It was not a judicious answer. She realized that, but she felt that she must speak with unhesitating candor.

"After all," she added, "can you be quite sure that this is your duty?"

Wyllard kept his eye on her. "No," he said, "I can't. In fact, when I sit down to think I can see at least a dozen reasons why it doesn't concern me. In a case of this kind that's always easy. It's just borne in upon me—I don't know how—that I have to go."

Agatha crossed to the window and sat down. He leaned upon a chairback looking at her gravely.

"Well," he continued, "we'll go on a little further. It seems better that I should make what's in my mind quite clear to you. You see, Captain Dampier and I start in a week."

Agatha was conscious of a shock of dismay.

"We may be back before the winter, but it's also quite likely that we may be ice-nipped before our work is through, and in that case it would be a year at least before we reach Vancouver," he went on steadily after a little pause. "In fact, there's a certain probability that all of us may leave our bones up there. Now, there's a thing I must ask you. Is it only a passing trouble that stands between you and Gregory? Are you still fond of him?"

Agatha's heart beat fast. It would have been a relief to assure herself that she was as fond of Gregory as she had been, but she could not do it.

"That is a point on which I cannot answer you," she declared in a voice that trembled.

"We'll let it go at that. The fact that Gregory sent me over for you implied a certain obligation. How far events have cleared me of it I don't know—and you don't seem willing to tell me. But I believe there is now less cause than there was for me to thrust my own wishes into the background, and, as I start in another week, the situation has forced my hand. I can't wait as I had meant to do, and it would be a vast relief to know that I had made your future safer than it is before I go. Will you marry me at the settlement the morning I start?"

Half-conscious, as she was, of the unselfishness which had prompted this suggestion, Agatha faced him in hot anger.

"Can you suppose for a moment that I would agree to that?" she asked.

"Wait," he pleaded. "Try to look at it calmly. First of all, I want you. You know that—though you have never shown me any tenderness, you can't doubt it—but I can't stay to win your liking. I must go away. As things stand, your future is uncertain; but as my wife it would, at least, be safe. However badly the man I leave in charge of the Range may manage there would be something saved out of the wreck, and I would like to make that something yours. As I said, I may be away a year, perhaps eighteen months, and I may never come back. If I don't return the fact that you would bear my name could cause you no great trouble. It would lay no restraint on you in any way."

Agatha looked him in the eyes, and spoke with quick intensity. "We can't contemplate your not coming back. It's unthinkable."

"Thank you," said Wyllard, still with the grave quietness she wondered at. "Then I'm not sure that my turning up again would greatly complicate the situation. There would, at least, be one way out of the difficulty. You wouldn't find your position intolerable if I could make you fond of me."

Agatha broke into a little, high-strung laugh that was near to weeping.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "aren't you taking too much for granted? Am I really to believe you are making this fantastic offer seriously? Do you suppose I would marry you —for your possessions?"

"My proposition does sound cold-blooded. Perhaps it is in one way, but you wouldn't always find me so practical and calculating. Just now, because my hand is forced, I am only anticipating things. If I live, you will some day have to choose between Gregory and me. In that case he must hold his own if he can."

"Against what you have offered me?" she flung the question at him.

He looked at her with his face set.

"I expect I deserved that. I wanted to make you safe. It's the most pressing difficulty."

The resentment was still in the girl's eyes.

"So far as I am concerned, you seem to believe it is the only difficulty. Oh, do you imagine that an offer of the kind you have made me, made as you have made it, would lead anyone to love you?"

Wyllard spoke with a new tenderness. "When I first saw your picture, and when I saw you afterwards, I loved your gracious quietness. Now you seem to have lost your repose and I love you better as you are. There is one thing, Agatha, that I must ask again, and it's your duty to tell me. Are you fonder of Gregory than you feel you ever could be of me?"

Agatha's eyes fell. She felt that she could not look at him nor could she answer his question honestly as she desired to answer it.

"At least I am bound to him until he releases me."

"Ah!" responded Wyllard, "that is what I was most afraid of. All along it hampered me, and in it you have the reason for my cold, business-like talk to-day. It is another reason why I should go away."

"For fear that you should tempt me from my duty?"

Wyllard's expression changed, and there crept into his eyes a gleam of the passion that he was smothering.

"My dear," he said, "I seem to know that I could make you break faith with that man. You belong to me. For three years you have been everywhere with me. Now I must go away and Gregory will have a clear field, but the probability is in favor of my coming back again, and then, if he has failed to make the most of his chance, I'll enforce my claim."

He seized both her hands, holding them firmly.

"That is my last word. At least, you will let me think that when I go up yonder into the mists and snow I shall take your good wishes for my success away with me."

She lifted her flushed face, and once looked him steadily in the eyes.

"My good wishes are yours, most fervently," she replied. "It would be intolerable that you should fail."

He looked sad as he let her hands fall. "After all," he said, "one can do only what one can."

He went away without another glance at her.

Not long afterwards Mrs. Hastings, who was possessed of a reasonable measure of curiosity, found occasion to enter the room.

"You have said something to trouble Harry?" she began.

"I'm not sure he's greatly troubled. In any case, I told him I would not marry him," Agatha answered.

Mrs. Hastings gave her a glance of compassionate astonishment.

"Oh," she said, "he's mad. Did he tell you that he means to leave Gregory in charge of Willow Range?"

Agatha's face showed her surprise, but Mrs. Hastings nodded reassuringly. "It's a fact," she asserted. "He asked Gregory to meet him here to save time, and"—she turned towards the window—"there's his wagon now."

She went to the door, and then turned again.

"Is there any blood—red blood we will call it—or even common-sense in you? You could have kept Harry here if you had wanted to do so!"

"No," replied Agatha, "I don't think I could. I'm not even sure that, if I'd had the right, I would have done it. He recognized that."

Mrs. Hastings looked at her dubiously. "Then," she commented, "you have either a somewhat extraordinary character, or you are in love with him in a way that is beyond most of us. In any case, I can't help feeling that you will be sorry some day for what you have done."

Next moment the door closed with a bang, and Agatha was left alone to analyze her sensations during her interview with Wyllard. She found the task difficult, for her memory of what had happened was confused and fragmentary. She had certainly been angry with Wyllard. It was humiliating that he had evidently taken it for granted that the greater security she would enjoy as his wife would have preponderance of weight with her, yet there was a certain satisfaction in the reflection that to leave her dependent upon Mrs. Hastings caused him concern. For another thing, his reserve had been perplexing, and it was borne in upon her that it would have cost her a more determined effort to withstand him had he spoken with fire and passion.

If the man had been fervently in love with her, why had he not insisted on that fact? she asked herself. Could it have been because, with the fantastic generosity of which he was evidently capable, he had been willing to leave his friend unhandicapped with an open field? That seemed too much to expect from any man. Then there was the other explanation—that he preferred to leave the choice wholly to her, lest he should tempt her too strongly to break faith with Gregory. This idea brought the blood to her face since it suggested that he believed that he had merely to urge her sufficiently in order to make her yield. There was, it seemed, no satisfactory explanation at all! The one fact remained that he had made her a dispassionate offer of marriage, and had left her to decide.

Wyllard could not have made the matter very much clearer. Shrewdly practical, as he was in some respects, there were times when he acted blindly, merely doing without reasoning what he felt sub-consciously was right. This had more than once involved him in disaster, but in the long run the failures of such men often prove better than the dictates of calculating wisdom.

Agatha found a momentary relief from her thoughts as she watched Hawtrey get down from his wagon and approach the house. The change in him was plainer than it had ever been. It may have been because she had now a standard of comparison that it was so apparent. He was tall and well-favored, and he moved with a jaunty yet not ungraceful swing; but it seemed to her that his bearing was merely the result of an empty self-sufficiency. There was, she felt, no force behind it. Gregory was smiling, and there was certainly a hint of sensuality in his face which suggested that the man might sink into a self-indulgent coarseness. Agatha remembered that she was still pledged to him and determinedly brushed these thoughts aside.

Hawtrey entered a room where, with a paper in his hand, Wyllard sat awaiting him.

"I asked you to drive over here because it would save time," said Wyllard. "I have to go in to the railroad at once. Here's a draft of the scheme I suggested. You had better tell me if there's anything you're not quite satisfied with."

He threw the paper on the table, and Hawtrey took it up.

"I'm to farm and generally manage the Range on your behalf," said Hawtrey after reading its contents. "My percentage to be deducted after harvest. I'm empowered to sell out grain or horses as appears advisable, and to have the use of teams and implements for my own place when occasion requires it."

He looked up. "I've no fault to find with the thing, Harry. It's generous."

"Then you had better sign it, and we'll get Hastings to witness it in a minute or two. In the meanwhile there's a thing I have to ask you. How do you stand in regard to Miss Ismay?"

Hawtrey pushed his chair back noisily. "That," he said, "is a subject on which I'm naturally not disposed to give you any information. How does it concern you?"

"In this way. Believing that your engagement must be broken off, I asked Miss Ismay to marry me."

Hawtrey was clearly startled, but in a moment or two he smiled.

"Of course," he said, "she wouldn't. As a matter of fact, our engagement isn't broken off. It's merely extended."

The two men looked at each other in silence for a moment or two, and there was a curious hardness in Wyllard's eyes. Hawtrey spoke again.

"In view of what you have just told me, why did you want to put me, of all people, in charge of the Range?" he asked.

"I'll be candid," answered Wyllard. "For one thing, you held on when I was slipping off the trestle that day in British Columbia. For another, you'll make nothing of your own holding, and if you run the Range as it ought to be run it will put a good many dollars into your pocket, besides relieving me of a big anxiety. If you're to marry Miss Ismay, I'd sooner she was made reasonably comfortable."

Hawtrey looked up with a flush in his face.

"Harry," he said, "this is extravagantly generous."

"Wait," returned Wyllard; "there's a little more to be said. I can't be back before the frost, and I may be away eighteen months. While I am away you will have a clear field—and you must make the most of it. If you are not married when I come back I shall ask Miss Ismay again. Now"—and he glanced at his comrade steadily—"does this stand in the way of you're going on with the arrangement we have arrived at?"

There was a rather tense silence for a moment or two, and then Hawtrey said:

"No; after all there is no reason why it should do so. It has no practical bearing upon the other question."

Wyllard rose. "Well," he suggested, "if you will call Allen Hastings in we'll get this thing fixed up."

The document was duly signed, and a few minutes later Wyllard drove away.

Mrs. Hastings contrived to have a few words with Hawtrey before he left the house.

"I've no doubt that Harry took you into his confidence on a certain point," she remarked.

"Yes," admitted Hawtrey, "he did. I was a little astonished, besides feeling rather sorry for him. There is, however, reason to believe that he'll soon get over it."

"You feel sure of that?" Mrs. Hastings smiled.

"Isn't it evident? If he had cared much about her he certainly wouldn't have gone away."

"You mean you wouldn't?"

"No," declared Hawtrey, "there's no doubt of that."

Mrs. Hastings smiled again. "Well," she commented, "I would like to think you were right about Harry; it would be a relief to me."

Hawtrey presently drove away, and soon after he left the homestead Agatha approached Mrs. Hastings.

"There's something I must ask you," she said. "Has Gregory consented to take charge of Wyllard's farm?"

"He has," answered Mrs. Hastings in her dryest tone.

There was a flash in Agatha's eyes.

"Oh," she said, "it's almost unendurable."

Agatha saw Wyllard only once again, and that was when he called early one morning. He got down from the wagon where Dampier sat, and shook hands with her and Allen and Mrs. Hastings. Few words were spoken, and she could not remember what she said, but when he swung himself up again and the wagon jolted away into the white prairie she went back to the house with a feeling of loss and depression.

CHAPTER XV

THE BEACH

For a fortnight after they reached Vancouver Wyllard and Dampier were very busy. They had various difficulties to contend with, for while they would have preferred to slip away to sea as quietly as possible a British vessel's movements are fenced about with many formalities, and they did not wish to ship a white man who could be dispensed with. Wyllard knew there were sailors and sealers in Vancouver and down Puget Sound who would have gone with him, but there was a certain probability of their discussing their exploits afterwards in the saloons ashore, which was about the last thing that he desired. It was essential that he should avoid notoriety as much as possible.

He had further trouble about obtaining provisions and general necessaries, for considerably more attention than the free-lance sealers cared about was being bestowed upon the North, and he did not desire to arouse the curiosity of the dealers as to why he was filling his lazaret up with Arctic stores. He obviated that difficulty by dividing his orders among all of them, and buying as little as possible. Dampier proved an adept at the difficult business, and eventually the schooner *Selache,* painted a pale green, crept out from the Narrows, at dusk one evening, under all plain sail, with her big main-boom making at least a fathom beyond her taffrail. On board were Wyllard, Dampier, and two other white men. A week later the *Selache* sailed into a deep, rock-walled inlet on the western coast of Vancouver Island. At the settlement the storekeeper made no difficulty about selling Wyllard all his flour and canned goods at higher figures than there was any probability of obtaining from the local ranchers.

The *Selache* slid down the inlet again, and lay for several days in a forest-shrouded arm near the mouth of it. When she once more dropped her anchor off a Siwash rancherie far up on the wild west coast, she was painted a dingy gray, and her sawn-off boom just topped her stern. One does not want a great main-boom in the northern seas, and a big mainsail needs men to handle it. Wyllard, however, shipped several sea-bred Indians who had made perilous voyages on the trail of the seal and halibut in open canoes. All of them had also sailed in sealing schooners. Their comrades sold him furs, and filled part of the hold with redwood billets and bark for the stove, for he had not considered it advisable to load too much Wellington coal.

Wyllard pushed out into the waste Pacific, and once when a beautiful big white mail boat reeled by him, driving with streaming bows into an easterly gale, he sent back a message to his friends upon the prairie. It duly reached them, for three weeks afterward Allen Hastings, opening *The Colonist,* which he had ordered from Victoria as soon as Wyllard sailed, read to his wife and Agatha a paragraph in the shipping news:

"*Empress of India,* from Yokohama, reports having passed small gray British schooner, flying ——" There followed several code letters, the latitude and longitude, and a line apparently by the water-front reporter: "No schooner belonging to this city allotted the signal in question."

Hastings smiled as he laid down the paper. "No," he observed, "that signal is Wyllard's private code. Agatha, won't you reach me down my map of the Pacific? It's just behind you."

As he looked around he noticed the significant expression on his wife's face, for the girl already had turned towards the shelf where he kept the lately purchased map.

The easterly gale that started did not last, for the wind came out of the west and north, and sank to foggy calms when it did not blow wickedly hard. This meant that the *Selache's* course was all to windward, and though they drove her unmercifully under reefed book-foresail, main trysail, and a streaming jib or two, with the brine going over her, she had made little headway when each arduous day was done. They were drenched to the skin continuously, and lashed by stinging spray. Cooking except of the crudest kind was out of the question, and sleep would have been impossible to any but worn-out sailors. The little crew was often aroused in the blackness of the night to haul down a burst jib, to get in another reef, or to crawl out on a plunging bowsprit washed by icy seas as the schooner lay with her lee rail under. Glad as they were of the respite it was even more trying to lie rolling wildly on the big smooth waves that hove out of the windless calm, while everything in the vessel banged to and fro. When the breeze came screaming through the fog or rain they sprang to make sail again.

Fate seemed to oppose them, as it was certain that, if their purpose was suspected, the hand of every white man whom they might come across would be against them. But they held on over leagues of empty ocean.

The season wore away, and at last the wind freshened easterly, and they ran for a week under boom-foresail and a jib, with the big gray combers curling as they foamed by high above her rail. Then the wind fell, and Dampier, who got an observation, armed his deep-sea lead, and, finding shells and shoal water, went aft to talk to Wyllard with the strip of Dunton's chart.

Wyllard, who was clad in oilskins, stood by the wheel. His face was tanned and roughened by cold and stinging brine. There was an open sore upon one of his elbows, and both his wrists were raw. Forward, a white man and two Siwash were standing about the windlass, and when the bows went up a dreary stretch of slate-gray sea opened beyond them, beneath the dripping jibs. The *Selache* was carrying sail, and lurching over the steep swell at some four knots an hour.

Dampier stopped near the wheel, and glanced at Wyllard's oilskins.

"You'll have to take them off. It's stuffed boots and those Indian seal-gut things or furs from now on," he said. "That leather cuff's chewing up your hand."

"We'll cut that out," replied Wyllard; "it's not to the point. Can't you get on?"

Dampier grinned. "We're on soundings, and they and Dunton's longitude 'most agree. With this wind we should pick the beach up in the next two days. Next question is, where were those men?"

"Where are they?" corrected Wyllard.

"If they've pushed on it's probably a different thing, though, if they'd food yonder, I don't quite see why they'd want to push on anywhere. It wouldn't be south, anyway. They'd run up against the Russians there."

"We've decided that already."

"I'm admitting it," said the skipper. "There's the other choice that they've gone up north. It's narrower across to Alaska there, and it's quite likely they might have a notion of looking out for one of the steam whalers. The Koriaks up yonder will have boats of some kind. If the boats are skin ones like those the Huskies have they might sledge them on the ice."

It was a suggestion that had been made several times before, but both the men realized that there was in all probability very little to warrant it. Wyllard had wasted no time endeavoring to learn what was known about the desolation on the western shore of the Behring Sea. He had bought a schooner and set out at once. It appeared almost impossible to him that any three men could haul the skin boats and supplies they would need far over hummocky ice.

"The point is that we'll have to fix on some course in the next few days," added Dampier. "Say we run in to make inquiries"—a gleam of grim amusement crept into his eyes—"what are we going to find? A beach with a roaring surf on it, and if we get a boat through, a desolate, half-frozen swamp behind it. It's quite likely there are people in the country, Koriaks or Kamtchadales, but, if there are, they'll probably move up and down after what they get to eat like the Huskies do, and we can't hang on and wait for them. 'Most any time next month we'll have the ice closing in."

Wyllard made no reply for another minute, and, as he stood with hands clenched on the wheel, a puff of bitter spray splashed upon his oilskins. They had been over it all often before, weighing conjecture after conjecture, and had found nothing in any that might serve to guide them. Now, when winter was close at hand, they had leagues of surf-swept beach to search for three men who might have perished twelve months earlier.

"We'll stand in until we pick up the beach," he said at length. "Then if there's no sign of them we'll push north as long as we can find open water. Now if you'll call Charly I'll let up at the wheel."

Another white man walked aft, and Wyllard, entering the little stern cabin, the top of which rose several feet above the deck, took off his wet oilskins and crawled, dressed as he was, into his bunk. Evening was closing in, and for a while he lay blinking at the swinging lamp, and wondering what the end of the search would be.

The *Selache* was a little fore and aft schooner of some ninety-odd tons, wholly unprotected against ice-chafe or nip, and he knew that prudence dictated their driving her south under every rag of canvas now. There was, however, the possibility of finding some sheltered inlet where she could lie out the winter, frozen in, and he had blind confidence in his crew. The white men were sealers who had borne the lash of snow-laden gales, the wash of icy seas, and tremendous labor at the oar, and the Indians had been born to an unending struggle with the waters. All of them had many times looked the King of Terrors squarely in the face. As an encouraging aid to strenuous effort they had been promised a tempting bonus if the *Selache* returned home successful.

While Wyllard pondered upon these things he went to sleep and slept soundly, though Dampier expected to raise the beach some time next morning. The skipper's expectation proved to be warranted, and, when Wyllard turned out, the stretch of shore lay before them, a dingy smear on a slate-green sea that was cut off from it by a wavy line of vivid whiteness, which he knew to be a fringe of spouting surf. It had cost Wyllard more than he cared to contemplate to reach that beach, and now there was nothing in the dreary spectacle that could excite any feeling, except a shrinking from the physical effort of the search. There was little light in the heavy sky or on the sullen heave of sea; the air was raw, the schooner's decks were sloppy, and the vessel rolled viciously as she crept shorewards with her mainsail peak eased down. What wind there was blew dead on-shore, which was not as the skipper would have had it.

Wyllard heard the splash of the lead as he and the white man, Charly, ate their breakfast in the little stern cabin. There was a clatter of blocks, and on going out on deck he found the men swinging a boat over. With Charly and two of the Indians he dropped into the boat, and Dampier, who had hove the schooner to, looked down on them over the vessel's rail.

"If you knock the bottom out of her put a jacket on an oar, and I'll try to bring you off," he said, pointing toward the boat. "If you don't signal I'll stand off and on with a thimble-headed topsail over the mainsail. You'll start back right away if you see us haul it down. When she won't stand that there'll be more surf than you'll have any use for with the wind dead on the beach."

Wyllard made a sign of comprehension, and they slid away on the back of a long sea. Waves rolled up behind them, cutting off the schooner's hull so that only her gray canvas showed above dim slopes of water. The beach rose fast before them. It looked forbidding with the spray-haze drifting over it, and the long wash of the Pacific weltering among its hammered stones. When the men drew a little nearer Wyllard stood up with the big sculling oar in his hand. There was no point to offer shelter, and in only one place could he see a strip of surf-lapped sand.

"It's a little softer than the boulders, anyway; we'll try it there," he ordered.

The oars dipped again, and in another minute the sea that came up behind them hove them high and broke into a little spout of foam. The next wave had a hissing crest, part of which splashed on board, and, like a toboggan down an icy slide, the boat went shoreward on the shoulders of the third. To keep her straight while the water seethed about them was all that they could do. For a moment their hearts were in their mouths when the wave left them to sink with a dizzy swing into the hollow of the sea.

They pulled desperately as another white-topped ridge came on astern, and they went up with it amid a chaotic frothing and splashing of spray. After that there was a shock and a crash. They sprang out into the knee-deep water and held fast to the boat while the foam boiled into her. Before the next sea came in they had run the boat up beyond its reach, and they discovered that there was not much the matter with her when they hove her over. Wyllard looked back at the tumbling surf.

"Dampier was right about that topsail; it won't be quite so easy getting off," he declared. "You'll stand by, Charly, and watch the schooner. If the surf gets steeper you can make some sign. I'll leave one of the Siwash on the rise yonder."

Then he walked up the beach. On the crest of the low rise a mile or two behind it, he stopped a while, gazing out at what seemed to be an empty desolation. There were willows in the hollow beneath him, and upon the slope a few little stunted trees, which resembled the juniper that he had seen among the ranges of British Columbia, but he could see no sign of any kind of life. What was more portentous, the mossy sod he stood upon was frozen, and there were stretches of snow among the straggling firs upon a higher ridge. Inland, the little breeze seemed to have fallen dead away, and there was an oppressive silence which the rumble of the surf accentuated.

Wyllard left one of the Indians on the hill and going on with the other scrambled through a half-frozen swamp in the hollow; but when they came back hours afterwards as the narrow horizon was drawing further in, they had found nothing to show that any man had ever entered that grim, silent land. The surf seemed a little smoother, and they reeled out through it with only a few inches of very cold water splashing about their boots, and pulled across a long stretch of darkening sea toward the rolling schooner.

Wyllard was weary and depressed, but it was not until he sat in the stern cabin with its cheerful twinkling stove and swinging lamp that he understood how he had shrunk from that forbidding wilderness. His consultation with Dampier, who came in by and by, was brief.

"We'll head north for a couple of days, and try again," he said.

He crawled into his berth early, and it was some time after midnight when he was awakened by being rudely flung out of it. That fact, and the slant of deck and sounds above, suggested that the schooner had been struck down by a sudden gale. He had grown more or less accustomed to such occurrences and to sleeping fully dressed, and in another moment or two he was out of the deckhouse. A sharp wind drove stinging flakes of snow into his face. It was very dark, but he guessed that the schooner's rail was in the sea, which was washing the decks, and that some of the crew were struggling to get the mainsail off her. A man whom he supposed to be Charly ran into him.

"Better come for'ard. Got to haul outer jib down before it blows away!" he shouted.

Up to his knees in water, Wyllard staggered after him and made out by the mad banging that some one had already cast the peak of the boom-foresail loose. He reached the windlass, and clutched it, as a sea that took him to the waist frothed in over the weather rail. The bows lurched out of it viciously, hurling another icy flood back on him, and he could see a dim white chaos of frothing water about and beneath them. Above rose the black wedge of the jibs.

He did not want to get out along the bowsprit to stop one of them down, but there are many things flesh and blood shrink from which must be faced at sea. He made out that a Siwash was fumbling at the down-haul made fast near his side, and when the man's shadowy figure rose up against the whiteness of the foam he made a jump forward. Then he was on the bowsprit, lying upon it while he felt for the foot-rope slung beneath. He found it, and was cautiously lowering himself when the man in front of him called out harshly, and he saw a white sea range up ahead. It broke short over with a rush and roar, and he clung with hands and feet for his life as the schooner's dipping bows rammed the seething mass.

The vessel went into it to the windlass. Wyllard was smothered in an icy flood that seemed bent on wrenching him from his hold, but that was only for a moment or two, and then, streaming with water, he was swung high above the sea again. It was bad enough merely to hold on, but that was a very small share of his task, for the big black sail that cut the higher darkness came rattling down its stay and fell upon him and his companion. As it dropped the wind took hold of the folds of it and buffeted them cruelly. As he clutched at the canvas it seemed to him incredible that he had not already been flung off headlong from the reeling spar. Still, that banging, thrashing canvas must be mastered somehow, though it was snow-soaked and almost unyielding, and with bleeding hands he clawed at it furiously while twice the bowsprit raked a sea and dipped him waist-deep into the water. At last, the other man flung him the end of the gasket, and they worked back carefully, leaving the sail lashed down, and scrambled aft to help the others who were making the big main-boom fast. When this was done Wyllard fell against Dampier and clutched at him.

"How's the wind?" he roared.

"Northeast," answered the skipper.

They could scarcely hear each other, though the schooner was lurching over it more easily now with shortened canvas, and Wyllard made Dampier understand that he wished to speak to him only by thrusting him towards the deck-house door. They went in together, and stood clutching at the table with the lamplight on their tense, wet faces and the brine that ran from them making pools upon the deck.

"The wind has hauled round," said the skipper, "the wrong way."

Wyllard made a savage gesture. "We've had it from the last quarter we wanted ever since we sailed, and we sailed nearly three months too late. We're too close in to the beach for you to heave her to?"

"A sure thing," agreed Dampier. "I was driving her to work off it with the sea getting up when the breeze burst on us. She put her rail right under, and we had to let go 'most everything before she'd pick it up. She's pointing somewhere north, jammed right up on the starboard tack just now, but I can't stand on."

This was evident to Wyllard, and he closed one hand tight. He wanted to stand on as long as possible before the ice closed in, but he realized that to do so would put the schooner ashore.

"Well?" he questioned sharply.

Dampier made a grimace. "I'm going out to heave her round. If we'd any sense in us we'd square off the boom then, and leg it away across the Pacific for Vancouver."

"In that case," observed Wyllard, "somebody would lose his bonus."

The skipper swung around on him with a flash in his eyes.

"The bonus!" he repeated. "Who was it came for you with two dollars in his pocket after he'd bought his ticket from Vancouver?"

Wyllard smiled at him. "If you took that up the wrong way I'm sorry. She ought to work off on the port track, and when we've open water to leeward you can heave her to. When it moderates we can pick up the beach again."

"That's just what I mean to do."

Dampier went out on deck, while Wyllard, flinging off his dripping clothing, crawled into his bunk and went quietly to sleep.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FIRST ICE

BEFORE they hove to the *Selache,* daylight broke on a frothing sea, across which scudded wisps of smoke-drift and thin showers of snow. With two little wet rags of canvas set the schooner lay almost head on to the big combers. Having little way upon her, she lurched over instead of ramming the waves, and though now and then one curled on board across her rail it was not often that there was much heavy water upon her slanted deck.

All around the narrow circle a leaden sky met the sea. It was bitterly cold, and the spray stung the skin like half-spent pellets from a gun. There was only one man, in turn, exposed to the weather, and he had little to do but brace himself against the savage buffeting of the wind as he clutched the wheel. The *Selache,* for the most part, steered herself, lifting buoyantly while the froth came sluicing aft from her tilted bows, falling off a little with a vicious leeward roll when a comber bigger than usual smote her to weather, and coming up again streaming to meet the next. Sometimes she forged ahead in what is called at sea, by courtesy, a "smooth," and all the time shroud and stay to weather gave out tumultuous harmonies, and the slack of every rope to leeward blew out in unyielding curves.

Three of the white men lay sleeping or smoking in the little cabin, which was partly raised above and partly sunk beneath the after-deck. It was a reasonably strong structure, but it worked, and sweated, as they sat at sea, and the heat of the stove had further opened up the seams in it.

Moisture dripped from the beams overhead, moisture trickled up and down the slanting deck, there were great globules of water on the bulk-heading, and everything, including the men's clothes and blankets, was wet. The men lay in their bunks from necessity, because it was a laborious matter to sit. They said very little since it was difficult to hear anything amid the cataclysm of elemental sound. It became at length almost a relief to turn out into inky darkness or misty daylight, dimmed by flying spray, to take a turn at the jarring wheel.

For three days the bad weather continued, and then, when the gale broke and a little pale sunshine streamed down on the tumbling sea, changing the gray combers to flashing white and green, the skipper gave her a double-reefed mainsail, part of the boom-foresail, and a jib or two, and thrashed her slowly back to the northward on the starboard tack. More than one of the men glanced over the taffrail longingly as the schooner gathered way. She was fast, and with a little driving and that breeze over her quarter she would bear them south toward warmth and ease at some two hundred miles a day, while the way they were going it would be a fight for every fathom with bitter, charging seas, and there lay ahead of them only cold and peril and toil incredible.

There are times at sea when human nature revolts from the strain that the overtaxed body must bear, the leaden weariness of worn-out limbs, and the sub-conscious effort to retain warmth and vitality in spite of the ceaseless lashing of the icy gale. Then, as aching muscles grow lax, the nervous tension becomes more insupportable, unless, indeed, utter weariness breeds indifference to the personal peril each time the decks are swept by a frothing flood, or a slippery spar must be clung to with frost-numbed and often bleeding hands.

The men on the *Selache* knew this, and it was to their credit that they obeyed when Dampier gave the word to put the helm up and trim the sheets over. Wyllard, however, stood a little apart with a hard-set face, and he looked forward over the plunging bows, for he was troubled by a sense of responsibility such as he had not felt since he had, one night several years before, asked for volunteers. He realized that an account of these men's lives might be demanded from him.

It was a fortnight later, and they had twice made a perilous landing without finding any sign of life on or behind the hammered beach, when they ran into the first of the ice. The gray day was near its end. The long heave faintly twinkling here and there, ran sluggishly after them. When creeping through a belt of haze they came into sight of several blurrs of grayish white that swung with the dim, green swell. The *Selache* was slowly lurching over it with everything aloft to the topsails then, and Dampier glanced at the ice with a feeling of deep anxiety.

"Earlier than I expected," he commented. "Anyway, it's a sure thing there's plenty more where that came from."

"Big patch away to starboard!" cried a man in the foremast shrouds.

Dampier turned to Wyllard. "What are you going to do?"

"What's most advisable?"

The skipper looked grave. "Well," he said, "that's quite simple. Get out of this, and head her south just as soon as we can, but I guess that's not quite what you mean."

"No," admitted Wyllard. "I meant for the next few hours or so. In a general way, we're still pushing on."

"I'm not worrying much about pushing her through.

That ice is light and scattered, and as she's going it won't hurt her much if she plugs some in the dark. It's what we're going to do the next two weeks that I'm not sure about. If there's ice we mayn't fetch the creek, where we'd figured on laying her up. It's still most a hundred miles to the north of us. The other inlet I'd fixed on is way further south."

This brought them back to the difficulty with which they had grappled at many a council. The men for whom they searched might have gone either north or south, or they might have gone inland, if, indeed, any of them survived.

"If we only knew how they had headed," said Wyllard quietly. "Still, right or not, I'm for pushing on."

Then Charly, who held the wheel, broke in.

"I guess it's north," he assented. "They'd have no use for fetching up among the Russians, and there's nobody else until you get to Japan. No white men, anyway. Besides, from the Behring Sea to the Kuriles is quite a long way."

"If you were dumped down ashore there, which way would you go?" Dampier asked.

"If I'd a wallet full of papers certifying me as a harmless traveler, it would be south just as hard as I could hit the trail. Guess I'd strike somebody out prospecting, or surveying, and they'd set me along to the Kuriles. Still, if I'd been sealing, I wouldn't head that way. No, sir. That's dead sure."

There was a reason for this certainty, right or wrong, in the minds of the sealers. How many of the skins they brought home were obtained in open water where they could fish without molestation they alone knew; but they were regarded in certain quarters as poachers and outlaws, who deserved no mercy. They had their differences with the Americans who owned the Prbyloffs. It was admitted that the Americans had bought the islands, and might reasonably be considered to have some claim upon the seals which frequented them. The free-lances bore their execrations and reprisals more or less resignedly, though that did not prevent them from occasionally exchanging compliments with oar butts or sealing clubs. But the Muscovite was a grim, mysterious figure they feared and hated.

"Then you'd have tried up north?" Wyllard suggested.

"Sure," answered the helmsman. "If I'd a boat and a rifle, and it was summer, I'd have pushed across for Alaska. You can eat birds and walrus, and a man might eat a furseal if he'd had nothing else for a week, though I've struck nothing that has more smell than the holluschickie blubber. If it was winter, I'd have tried the ice. The Huskies make out on it for weeks together, and quite a few of the steam whaler men have trailed an odd hundred or two miles over it one time or another. They hadn't tents and dog-teams either."

Wyllard's face grew anxious. He had naturally considered both courses, and had decided that they were out of the question. Seas do not freeze up solid, and that three men should transport a boat, supposing that they had one, over leagues of ice appeared impossible. An attempt to cross the narrow sea, which is either wrapped in mist or swept by sudden gales, in any open craft would clearly result only in disaster, but, admitting that, he felt that, had he been in those men's place, he would have headed north. There was one question which had all along remained unanswered, and that was how they had reached the coast from which they had sent their message.

"Anyway," he said, after a long pause, "we'll stand on, and run into the creek we've fixed on, if it's necessary."

Dusk had closed down on them, and it had grown perceptibly colder. The haze crystallized on the rigging, the rail was white with rime, and the deck grew slippery, but they left everything on the *Selache* to the topsails, and she crept on erratically through the darkness, avoiding the faint spectral glimmer of the scattered ice. The breeze abeam propelled her with gently leaning canvas at some four knots to the hour, and now and then Wyllard, who hung about the deck that night, fancied he could hear a thin, sharp crackle beneath the slowly lifting bows.

Next day the haze thickened, and there seemed to be more ice about, but the breeze was fresher, and there was, at least, no skin upon the ruffled sea. They took off the topsails, and proceeded cautiously, with two men with logger's pikepoles forward, and another in the eyes of the foremast rigging. They struck nothing, fortunately, and when night came the *Selache* lay rolling in a heavy, portentous calm. Dampier and one or two of the men declared their certainty that there was ice near them, but, at least, they could not see it, though there was now no doubt about the crackling beneath the schooner's side. It was an anxious night for most of the crew, but a breeze that drove the haze aside got up with the sun, and Dampier expected to reach the creek before darkness fell. He might have succeeded but for the glistening streak on the horizon, which presently crept in on them, and resolved itself into detached gray-white masses, with openings of various sizes in and out between them. The breeze was freshening, and the *Selache* was going through it at some six knots, when Dampier came aft to Wyllard, who was standing at the wheel. There was a moderately wide opening in the floating barrier close ahead of him. The rest of the crew stood silent watching the skipper, for they were by this time more or less acquainted with Wyllard's temperament.

"You can't get through that," said Dampier, pointing to the ice.

Wyllard looked at him sourly, and the white men, at least, understood what he was feeling. So far, he had had everything against him—calm, and fog, and sudden gale—and now, when he was almost within sight of the end of the first stage of his journey, they had met the ice.

"You're sure of that?" he questioned.

Dampier smiled. "It would cost too much, or I'd let you try." He called to the man perched high in the foremost shrouds, and the answer came down: "Packed right solid a couple of miles ahead."

Wyllard lifted one hand, and let it suddenly fall again.

"Lee, oh! We'll have her round," he said, and spun the wheel.

The men breathed more easily as they jumped for the sheets, and with a great banging and thrashing of sailcloth the vessel shot up to windward, and turned as on a pivot. As the schooner gathered way on the other tack, the men glanced at Wyllard, for the *Selache's* bows were pointing to the southeast again, and they felt that was not the way he was going.

Wyllard turned to Dampier with a gesture of impatience.

"Baulked again!" he said. "It would have been a relief to have rammed her in. With this breeze we'd have picked that creek up in the next six hours."

"Sure!" replied Dampier, who glanced at the swirling wake.

"Then, if we can't get through the ice we can work the schooner round. Stand by to flatten all sheets in, boys."

They obeyed orders cheerfully, though they knew it meant a thrash to windward along the perilous edge of the ice. Soon the windlass was caked with glistening ice, and long spikes of it hung from her rail, while the slippery crystals gathered thick on deck. Lumps and floes of ice detached themselves from the parent mass, and sailed out to meet the vessel, crashing on one another, while it seemed to the men who watched him that Wyllard tried how closely he could shave them before he ran the *Selache* off with a vicious drag at the wheel. None of them, however, cared to utter a remonstrance.

They brought the schooner around when she had stretched out on the one tack a couple of miles, and, standing in again close-hauled, found the ice thicker than ever. Then she came around once more, and, until the early dusk fell, Wyllard stood at the jarring helm or high up in the forward shrouds.

"We can't work along the edge in the dark," he said to Dampier.

"Well," answered the skipper dryly, "it wouldn't be wise. We could stand on as she's lying until half through the night, and then come round and pick up the ice again a little before sun-up."

Wyllard made a sign of acquiescence. "Then," he said, "don't call me until you're in sight of it. A day of this kind takes it out of one."

He moved aft heavily toward the deck-house, and Dampier watched him with a smile of comprehension, for he was a man who had in his time made many fruitless efforts, and bravely faced defeat. After all, it is possible that when the final reckoning comes some failures will count.

For several hours the *Selache* stretched out close-hauled into what they supposed to be open water, and they certainly saw no ice. They hove her to, and when the wind fell light brought her round and crept back slowly upon the opposite tack. Wyllard had gone to sleep after his day of anxious work, and daylight was just breaking when he next went out on deck. There was scarcely a breath of wind, and the heavy calm seemed portentous and unnatural. The schooner lay lurching on a sluggish swell, with the frost-wool thick on her rigging, and a belt of haze ahead of her. The ice glimmered in the growing light, but in one or two places stretches of blue-gray water seemed to penetrate it, and Dampier, who strode aft when he saw Wyllard, said he believed that there must be an opening somewhere.

"By the thickness of it, that ice has formed some time, and as we've seen nothing but a skin it must have come from further north," he added. "It gathered up under a point or in a bay most likely, until a shift of wind broke it out, and the stream or breeze sent it down this way. That seems to indicate that there can't be a great deal of it, but a few days' calm and frost would freeze it solid."

"Well?" Wyllard returned impatiently.

"It lies between us and the inlet, and it's quite clear that we can't stay where we are. Once we got nipped, there'd probably be an end of her. We must get into that inlet at once or make for the other further south."

Wyllard shook his head. "It all leads back to the same point. We must get through the ice. The one question is—how is it to be done?"

"With a working breeze I'd stand into the biggest opening, but as there's none we'll wait until it clears a little, and then send a boat in. The sun may bring the wind."

They had breakfast while they waited, but the wind did not come, and it was several hours later when a pale coppery disc became visible and the haze grew thinner. Then they swung a boat out hastily, for it would not be very long before the light died away again. Two white men and an Indian dropped into the boat and they pulled across half a mile of sluggishly heaving water, crept up an opening, and presently vanished among the ice. Soon afterward the low sun went out, and wisps of ragged cloud crept up from the westward, while smears of vapor blurred the horizon, and the swell grew steeper. There was no wind at all, but blocks and canvas banged and thrashed furiously at every roll, until they lowered the mainsail and lashed its heavy boom to the big iron crutch astern. The boat remained invisible, but its crew had been given instructions to push on as far as possible if they found clear water, and Dampier, who did not seem uneasy about the men, paced up and down the deck while the afternoon wore away.

CHAPTER XVII

DEFEAT

A GRAY dimness was creeping in upon the schooner when a bitter breeze sprang up from the westward, and Dampier bade the crew get the mainsail on to the *Selache.*

"I don't like the look of the weather, and I'm beginning to feel that I'd like to see that boat," he said. "Anyhow, we'll get way on her."

It was a relief to hoist the mainsail. The work put a little warmth into the sailors. The white men had been conscious of a growing uneasiness about their comrades in the boat, and action of any sort was welcome The breeze had freshened before they set the sail, and there were white-caps on the water when the *Selache* headed for the ice, which had somewhat changed its formation, for big masses had become detached from it and were moving out into the water, while the open space had become perceptibly narrower. The light was now fading rapidly, and Wyllard took the wheel when Dampier sent forward the man who had held it.

"Get the cover off the second boat, and see everything clear for hoisting out," commanded the skipper, and then called to Wyllard, "We're close enough. You'd better heave her round."

The schooner came around with a thrashing of canvas, stretched out seawards, and came back again with her deck sharply slanted and little puffs of spray blowing over her weather-rail, for there was no doubt that the breeze was freshening fast. Dampier now sent a man up into the foremast shrouds, and looked at Wyllard afterward.

"I'd heave a couple of reefs down if I wasn't so anxious about that blamed boat," he said. "As it is, I want to be ready to pick her up just as soon as we see her, and it's quite likely she'd turn up when we'd got way off the schooner, and the peak eased down."

Wyllard realized that Dampier was right as he glanced over the rail at the dimness that was creeping in on them. It was blowing almost fresh by this time, and the *Selache* was driving very fast through the swell, which began to froth here and there. It is, as he knew from experience, always hard work, and often impossible, to pull a boat to windward in any weight of breeze, which rendered it advisable to keep the schooner under way. If the boat drove by them while they were reefing it might be difficult to pick her up afterwards in the dark. He was now distinctly anxious about her. Just as the light was dying out, the man in the shrouds sent down a cry.

"I see them, sir!" he said.

Dampier turned to Wyllard with a gesture of relief. "That's a weight off my mind. I wish we had a reef in, but"—he glanced up at the canvas—"she'll have to stand it. Anyway, I'll leave you there. We want to get that second boat lashed down again."

This, as Wyllard recognized, was necessary, though he would rather have had somebody by him and the rest of them ready to let the mainsheet run, inasmuch as he was a little to windward of the opening, and surmised that he would have to run the schooner down upon the boat. It was a few moments later when he saw the boat emerge from the ice, and the men in her appeared to be pulling strenuously. They were, perhaps, half a mile off, and the schooner, heading for the ice, was sailing very fast. Wyllard lost sight of the boat again, for a thin shower of whirling snow suddenly obscured the light. Dampier called to him.

"You'll have to run her off," he said. "Boys, slack out your sheets."

There was a clatter of blocks, and when Wyllard pulled his helm up it taxed all his strength. The *Selache* swung around, and he gasped with the effort to control her as she drove away furiously into the thickening snow. She was carrying far too much canvas, but they could not heave her to and take it off her now. The boat must be picked up first, and the veins rose swollen to Wyllard's forehead as he struggled with the wheel. There is always a certain possibility of bringing a fore-and-aft rigged vessel's main-boom over when she is running hard, and this is apt to result in disaster to her spars. So fast was the *Selache* traveling that the sea piled up in big white waves beneath her quarter, and, cold as the day was, the sweat of tense effort dripped from Wyllard as he foresaw what he had to do. First of all, he must hold the schooner straight before the wind without letting her fall off to leeward, which would bring the booms crashing over; then he must run past the boat, which he could no longer see, and round up the schooner with fore-staysail aback to leeward of her, to wait until she drove down on them.

This would not have been difficult in a moderate breeze, but the wind was blowing furiously and the schooner was greatly pressed with sail. He thought of calling the others to lower the mainsail peak, but with the weight of wind there was in the canvas he was not sure that they could haul down the gaff. Besides, they were busy securing the boat, which must be made fast again before they hove the other in, and it was almost dark now. In view of what had happened in the same waters one night, four years before, the desire to pick up the boat while there was a little light left became an obsession.

The swell was rapidly whitening and getting steeper.

The *Selache* hove herself out of it forward as she swung up with streaming bows. It seemed to Wyllard that he must overrun the boat before he noticed her, but at last he saw Dampier swing himself on to the rail. The skipper stood there clutching at a shroud, and presently swinging an arm, turned toward Wyllard.

"Right ahead!" he shouted. "Let her come up a few points before you run over them."

Wyllard put his helm down a spoke or two, which was easy, and then as the bows swung high again there was a harsh cry from the man who stood above Dampier in the shrouds.

"Ice!" he roared. "Big pack of it right under your weather bow."

Dampier shouted something, but Wyllard did not hear what he said. He was conscious only that he had to decide what he must do in the next few seconds. If he let the *Selache* come up to avoid the boat, there was the ice ahead, and at the speed she was traveling it would infallibly incrush her bows, while if he held her straight there was the boat close in front of her. To swing her clear of both by going to leeward he must bring the mainsail and boom-foresail over with a tremendous shock, but that seemed preferable, and with his heart in his mouth he pulled his helm up.

He fancied he cried out in warning, but was never sure of it, though three men came running to seize the main-sheet. The schooner fell off a little, swinging until the boom-foresail came over with a thunderous bang and crash. She rolled down, heaving a wide strip of wet planking out of the sea, and now for a moment or two there were great breadths of canvas swung out on either hand. Then the ponderous main-boom went up high above his head, and he saw three shadowy figures dragged aft as they tried in vain to steady it. The big mainsail was bunched up, a vast, portentous shape above him, and he set his lips, and pulled up the helm another spoke as it swung.

He never quite knew what happened after that. There was a horrible crash, and the schooner appeared to be rolling over bodily. The spokes he clung to desperately reft themselves from his grasp, the deck slanted until one could not stand upon it, and something heavy struck him on the head. He dropped, and Dampier flung himself upon the wheel above his senseless body.

There was mad confusion, and a frantic banging of canvas as the schooner came up beam to the wind, with her rent mainsail flogging itself to tatters. Its ponderous boom was broken, and the mainmast-head had gone, but it was not the first time the sealers had grappled with similar difficulties, and Dampier kept his head. He had the boat to think of, and she was somewhere to windward, hidden in the sudden darkness and the turmoil of the quickly rising sea, but the schooner counted most of all! His crew could scarcely hear him through the uproar made by the thundering canvas, and the screaming of the wind, but the orders were given, and from habit and the custom of their calling the men knew what the commands must be.

They hauled a jib down, backed the fore-staysail, and got the boom-foresail sheeted in, but they let the rent mainsail bang, for it could do no more damage than it had already done.

A man sprang up on the rail with a blue light in his hand, and as the weird radiance flared in a long streak to leeward a cry rose from the water. In another few moments a blurred object, half hidden in flying spray, drove down upon the schooner furiously on the top of a sea, and then there was sudden darkness as the man flung down the torch.

Another harsh and half-heard cry rose out of the obscurity. An indistinguishable object plunged past the schooner's stern, there was a crash to leeward as the schooner rolled, and a man standing up in the boat clutched her rail. The man was swung out of it as the vessel rolled back again, but he crawled on to the rail with a rope in one hand, and after jamming it fast around something, he sprang down with the hooks of the lifting tackles which one of the crew had given him. While two more men scrambled up, there was a clatter of blocks, but a shottered sea struck the boat as they hove her clear, and, when she swung in, the brine poured out through the rents in her. Dampier waved an arm as they dropped her on the deck, and they heard him faintly.

"Boys," he shouted, "you have got to cut that mainsail down!"

They obeyed somehow, hanging on to the mast-hoops, and now and then enveloped by the madly flogging canvas. After that they trimmed her fore-staysail over, and there was by contrast a curious quietness as Dampier jammed his helm up, and the schooner swung off before the sea.

Then somebody lighted a lantern, and Charly stooped over Wyllard, who lay limp and still beside the wheel. In the feeble light, Wyllard's face showed gray except where a broad red stain had spread across it. Dampier cast a glance at him.

"Get him below, and into his bunk, two of you," he commanded.

The men carried him with difficulty, for the *Selache* lurched viciously each time a white-topped sea came up upon her quarter. As soon as it seemed advisable to leave the deck Dampier went down. Wyllard lay in his bunk, with his eyes half-open. His face was colorless except for the broad smear of blood, which was oozing fast from a laceration in his scalp. Dampier, who noticed his chilliness, did not trouble about the wound. He stripped off the senseless man's long boots, and, unshipping a hot fender iron from the stove, laid it against his feet. Afterward he contrived to get some whisky down Wyllard's throat, and then he set to work to wash the scalp wound, dropping into the water a little of the permanganate of potash, which is freely used at sea. When that was done he applied a rag dipped in the same fluid, and seeing no result of his efforts went back on deck. He was anxious about his patient, but not unduly so, for he had discovered long ago that men of Wyllard's type are apt to recover from more serious injuries.

It was blowing very hard when the skipper stood near the wheel. A steep sea was already tumbling after the schooner, but she was, at least, heading out from where they supposed the ice to be, and he let her go, keeping her away before it, and heading a little south of east. The next morning the sea was very high, and the faint light was further dimmed by snow, but it seemed safe to Dampier, and the vessel held on while the big combers came up astern and forged by high above her rail.

The *Selache* was traveling fast to the eastward. She was under boom-foresail and one little jib, with her mainmast broken short off where the bolts of the halliard blocks had traversed it. Dampier realized that every knot the vessel made then could not be recovered that season. He wondered, with a little uneasiness, what Wyllard would say when he came to himself again.

Next day the breeze moderated somewhat, and they let the schooner come up a little, heading further south. On the morning after that Wyllard showed signs of returning consciousness. Dampier, however, kept away from him, partly to allow his senses to readjust themselves, and partly because he shrank from the necessary interview. When dusk was falling, Charly went on deck to say that Wyllard, who seemed perfectly conscious, insisted on seeing the skipper, and with some misgivings Dampier went down into the little cabin. The lamp was lighted, and when he sat down Wyllard, who raised himself feebly on his pillow, turned a pallid face to him.

"Charly tells me you picked the boat up," he said.

"We did," answered Dampier. "She had three or four planks on one side ripped out of her."

Wyllard's faint grimace implied that this did not matter, and Dampier braced himself for the question he dreaded. He had to face it another moment.

"How's she heading?"

"A little south of east."

Wyllard's face hardened. It was still blowing moderately and by the heave of the vessel and the wash of water outside he could guess how fast she was traveling. For a moment or two there was an oppressive silence in the little cabin. Then Wyllard spoke again.

"You have been running to the eastwards since I was struck down?" he asked.

Dampier nodded. "Three days," he confessed. "Just now the breeze is on her quarter."

He winced under Wyllard's gaze, and spread out his hands with a deprecating gesture.

"Now," he added, "what else was there I could do? She wrung her masthead off when you jibed her and there's not stick enough left to set any canvas that would shove her to windward. I might have hove her to, but the first time the breeze hauled easterly she'd have gone up on the beach or among the ice with us. I had to run!"

Wyllard closed a feeble hand. "Dunton was crippled, too. It's almost incredible."

"In one way, it looks like that, but, after all, a jibe's quite a common thing with a fore-and-after. If you run her off to lee when she's going before it, her mainboom's bound to come over. Of course, nobody would run her off in a wicked breeze unless he had to, but you'd no choice with the ice in front of you."

Wyllard lay very still for a minute. It was clear to him that his project must be abandoned for that season, which meant that at least six months must elapse before he could even approach the Kamtchatkan coast again.

"Well," he inquired at length, "what do you mean to do?"

"If the breeze holds we could pick up one of the Aleutians in a few days, but I'm keeping south of the islands. There'll probably be ugly ice along the beaches, and I've no fancy for being cast ashore by a strong tide when the fog lies on the land. With westerly winds I'd sooner hold on for Alaska. We could lie snug in an inlet there, and, it's quite likely, get a cedar that would make a spar. I can't head right away for Vancouver with no mainsail."

This was clear to Wyllard, who made a weak gesture. "If the wind comes easterly?"

Dampier pursed up his lips. "Then, unless I could fetch one of the Kuriles, we'd sure be jammed. She won't beat to windward, and there'd be all Kamtchatka to lee of us. The ice is packing up along the north of it now, and the Russians have two or three settlements to the south. We don't want to run in and tell them what we're after."

A faint smile touched Wyllard's lips. "No," he said, "not after that little affair on the beach. Since it's very probable that the vessel they send up to the seal islands would deliver store along the coast, the folks in authority would have a record of it. They would call the thing piracy—and, in a sense, they'd be justified."

He was silent for a few moments, and then looked up again wearily.

"I wonder," he remarked, "how that boat's crew ever got across to Kamtchatka. It was north of the islands where the man brought Dunton the message."

Dampier understood that Wyllard desired to change the subject, for this was a question they had often discussed already.

"Well," he replied, "I still hold to my first notion. They were blown ashore on the beach we have just left, and made prisoners. Then a supply schooner or perhaps a steamer came along, and they were sent off in her to be handed over to the authorities. The vessel put in somewhere. We'll say she was lying in an inlet with a boat astern, and somehow our friends cut that boat loose in the dark, and got away in her."

He broke off for a moment to look at his companion significantly.

"You can find quite a few points where that idea seems to fail," he added. "They were in Kamtchatka, but I'm beginning to feel that we shall never know any more than that."

Wyllard made a gesture of concurrence, but in his face Dampier saw no sign that he meant to abandon his project. He seemed to sink into sleep, and the skipper, who went up on deck, paced to and fro a while before he stopped by the wheel and turned to the helmsman.

"You can let her come up a couple of points. We may as well make a little southing while we can," he said.

Charly, who was steering, looked up with suggestive eagerness. "Then he's not going for the Aleutians?"

"No," answered Dampier dryly. "I was kind of afraid of that, but I choked him off. Anyway, this year won't see us back in Vancouver." He paused. "We're going to stay up here until we find out where those men left their bones. The man who has this thing in hand isn't the kind that lets up."

Charly made no answer, but his face hardened as he put his helm down a spoke or two.

Next day the wind fell lighter, but for a week it still held westerly, and after that it blew moderately fresh from the south. Crippled as she was, the *Selache* would lie a point or two south of east when they had set an old cut-down fore-staysail on what was left of her mainmast. The hearts of her crew became lighter as she crawled on across the Pacific. The men had no wish to be blown back to the frozen North.

The days were growing shorter rapidly, and the sun hung low in the southern sky when at last the schooner crept into one of the many inlets that indent the coast of Southern Alaska. There was just wind enough to carry her in around a long, foam-lapped point, and soon afterwards they let the anchor go in four fathoms of water. Their haven was a sheltered arm of the sea with a river mouth not far away. There was no sign of life anywhere and the ragged cedars that crept close down to the beach stood out in somber spires against the gleaming snow.

The cold was not particularly severe when the *Selache* arrived, but when Dampier went ashore next morning to pick a log from which they could hew a mast the temperature suddenly fell, and that night the drift ice from the river mouth closed in on them. When the late daylight broke the schooner was frozen fast, and they knew it would be several months before she moved again. It was before the gold rush, and in winter Alaska was practically cut off from all communication with the south. No man would have attempted to traverse the tremendous snow-wrapped desolation of almost impassable hills and trackless forests that lay between them and the nearest of the commercial factories on the north, or the canneries on the other hand. Besides, the canneries were shut up in winter time. They were prisoners, and could only wait with what patience they could muster until the thaw set them free again.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DELICATE ERRAND

THERE was a sharp frost outside, and the prairie was white with a thin sprinkle of snow, when a little party sat down to supper in the Hastings homestead, one Saturday evening. Hastings sat at the head of the table, Mrs. Hastings at the foot with her little daughters, and Agatha, Sproatly, and Winifred between them. Sproatly and Winifred had just driven over from the railroad settlement, as they did now and then, and that was why the meal, which was usually served early in the evening, had been delayed an hour or so. The two hired men, whom Mrs. Hastings had not kept waiting, had gone out to some task in the barn or stables.

Sproatly took a bundle of papers out of his pocket and laid them on the table. There had been a remarkable change in his appearance, for he now wore store clothes, and the skin coat he had taken off when he came in was a new one. It occurred to Mrs. Hastings that there was a certain significance in this, though Sproatly had changed his occupation some time before, and now drove about the prairie as an agent for certain makers of agricultural implements.

"I called for your mail and Gregory's before we left," he said. "I had to go around to see Hawtrey, which is partly what made us so late, though Winifred couldn't get away as soon as she expected. They have floods of wheat coming in to the elevators and I understand that the milling people can't take another bushel in."

Mrs. Hastings glanced at Agatha, who understood what the look meant, for Sproatly had hitherto spoken of Winifred circumspectly as Miss Rawlinson.

Hastings took the papers which Agatha handed to him and laid them aside.

"We'll let them wait until supper's over. I don't expect any news that's particularly good," he said. "The bottom's apparently dropping out of the wheat market."

"Mr. Hamilton can't get cars enough, and we'll have to shut down in another day or two unless they turn up," remarked Winifred. "It's much the same all along the line. The Winnipeg traffic people wired us that they haven't an empty car in the yards. Why do you rush the grain in that way? It's bound to break the market."

Hastings smiled. "Well," he explained, "a good many of us have bills to meet. For another thing, they've had a heavy crop in Manitoba, Dakota and Minnesota, and I suppose some folks have an idea they'll get in first before the other people swamp the Eastern markets. I think they're foolish. It's a temporary scare. Prices will stiffen by and by."

"That's what Mr. Hamilton says, but I suppose the thing is natural. Men are very like sheep, aren't they?"

Mr. Hastings laughed. "Well," he admitted, "we are, in some respects. When prices break a little we generally rush to sell. One or two of my neighbors are holding on, and it's hardly likely that very much of my wheat will be flung on to a falling market."

"We have been getting a good deal from the Range."

There was displeasure in Hastings' face. "Gregory's selling largely on Harry's account?"

"They've been hauling wheat in to us for the last few weeks," said Winifred.

Agatha noticed that Hastings glanced at his wife significantly, but Mrs. Hastings interposed and forbade any further conversation on the subject until supper was over. After the table had been cleared Hastings opened his papers. The others sat expectantly silent, while he turned the pages over one after another.

"No," he said, "there's no news of Harry, and I'm afraid it's scarcely possible that we'll hear anything of him this winter."

Agatha was conscious that Mrs. Hastings' eyes were upon her, and she sat very still, though her heart was beating faster than usual. Hastings went on again:

"The *Colonist* has a line or two about a barque from Alaska which put into Victoria short of stores. She was sent up to an A. C. C. factory, and had to clear out before she was ready. The ice, it seems, was closing in unusually early. A steam whaler at Portland reports the same thing, and from the news brought by a steamer from Japan all communication with Northeastern Asia is already cut off."

No one spoke for a moment or two, and Agatha, leaning back in her chair, glanced around the room. There was not much furniture in it, but, though this was unusual on the prairie, door and double casements were guarded by heavy hangings. The big brass lamp overhead shed a cheerful light, and birch wood in the stove snapped and cracked noisily, and the stove-pipe, which was far too hot to touch, diffused a drowsy heat. One could lounge beside the fire contentedly, knowing that the stinging frost was drying the snow to dusty powder outside. The cozy room heightened the contrast that all recognized in thinking of Wyllard. Agatha pictured the little schooner bound fast in the Northern ice, and then two or three travel-worn men crouching in a tiny tent that was buffeted by an Arctic gale. She could see the poles bend, and the tricings strain.—

After that, with a sudden transition, her thoughts went back to the early morning when Wyllard had driven away, and every detail of the scene rose up clearly in her mind. She saw him and the stolid Dampier sitting in the wagon, with nothing in their manner to suggest that they were setting out upon a perilous venture, and she felt his hand close tight upon her fingers, as it had done just before the vehicle jolted away from the homestead. She could once more see the wagon growing smaller and smaller on the white prairie, until it dipped behind the crest of a low hill, and the sinking beat of hoofs died away. Then, at least, she had realized that he had started on the first stage of a journey which might lead him through the ice-bound gates of the North to the rest that awaits the souls of sailors. She could not, however, imagine him shrinking from any ordeal. Gripping helm, or hauling in the sled traces, he would gaze with quiet eyes steadfastly ahead, even if he saw only the passage from this world to the next. Once more a curious thrill ran through her, and there was pride as well as regret in it. Presently she became conscious that Hastings was speaking.

"What took you around by the Range, Jim?" he asked.

"Collecting," answered Sproatly. "I sold Gregory a couple of binders earlier in the season, but I couldn't get a dollar out of him." He laughed. "Of course, if it had been anybody else I'd have stayed until he handed over the money, but I couldn't press Gregory too hard after quartering myself upon him as I did last winter, though I'm rather afraid my employers wouldn't appreciate that kind of delicacy."

Mrs. Hastings looked thoughtful. "Gregory should have been able to pay. He thrashed out a moderately good crop."

"About two-thirds of what it should have been, and I've reason for believing that he has been putting up a mortgage. Interest's heavy. There's another matter. I wonder if you've heard that he's getting rid of two of Harry's hands? I mean Pat and Tom Moran."

"You're sure of that?" Hastings asked sharply.

"Tom told me."

Mrs. Hastings leaned forward suddenly in her chair. "Then," she said, "I'm going to drive across on Monday, and have a few words with Gregory. Did Moran tell you that Harry had decided to keep the two of them on throughout the year?"

"He wasn't very explicit, but he seemed to feel he had a grievance against Gregory. Of course, in a way, you can't blame Gregory. He's in charge, and it isn't in him to carry out Harry's policy. This fall in wheat is getting on his nerves, and in any case he'd probably have held his hand and cut down the crop next year."

"I do blame him." Mrs. Hastings turned to Agatha. "You will understand that in a general way there's not much that can be done when the snow's upon the ground, and as one result of it the hired man prefers to engage himself for the year. To secure himself from being turned adrift when harvest is over he frequently makes a concession in wages. Now I know Harry intended to keep those two men on, and Tom Moran, who has a little half-cleared ranch back somewhere in the bush of Ontario, came out here tempted by higher wages. I understand he had to raise a few dollars or give the place up, and he left his wife behind. Many of the smaller ranch men can't live upon their holdings. Well, I'm going over on Monday to tell Gregory he has got to keep these two men, and you're coming with me."

Agatha made no reply. In the first place, she knew that if Mrs. Hastings had made any plan she would gain nothing by objecting, and in addition to this she was conscious of a certain desire to go. She felt that if Wyllard had let the men understand that he would not dismiss them, the promise, implied or explicit, must be redeemed. Wyllard would not have attempted to release himself from it—she was sure of that—and it appeared intolerable to her that another man should be permitted to do anything that would unfavorably reflect on him. Somewhat to her relief, Hastings started another topic.

"You have sold quite a few binders and harrows one way or another, haven't you, Jim?" he asked.

Sproatly laughed. "I have," he answered. "As I told the Company's Western representative some time ago, a man who could sell patent medicine to the folks round here could do a good trade in anything. He admitted that my contention sounded reasonable, but I didn't wear store clothes then, and he seemed very far from sure of me. Anyway, he gave me a show, and now I've got two or three complimentary letters from the Company. They've added a few dollars to my salary, and hint that it's possible they may put me in charge of an implement store."

"And you're satisfied?"

"Well," said Sproatly, with an air of reflection, "in some respects, I suppose I am. In others, the thing's galling. You have to report who you've called upon, and, if you couldn't do business, why they bought somebody else's machines. If you can't get a farmer to take you in you have to put up at a hotel. There's no more camping in a birch bluff under your wagon. Besides, you have to wear store clothes."

Hastings glanced at Winifred, and Agatha fancied that she understood what was in his mind.

"Some folks would sooner sleep in a hotel," he remarked, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Then," declared Sproatly, "they don't know very much. They're the kind of men who'd spend an hour every morning putting their clothes on, and they haven't found out that there's no comfort in any garment until you've had to sew two or three flour bag patches on to it. Then think of the splendid freeness of the other way of living. You get your supper when you want it and just as you like it. No tea tastes as good as the kind with the wood smoke in it that you drink out of a blackened can. You can hear the little birch leaves and the grasses whispering about you when you lie down at night, and you drive on in the glorious freshness—just when it pleases you—every morning. Now the Company has the whole route and programme plotted out for me. Their clerks write me letters demanding most indelicately why I haven't done this and that."

Winifred looked at him disapprovingly. "Civilization," she said, "implies responsibility. You can't live just as you like without its being detrimental to the community."

"Oh, yes," returned Sproatly with a rueful gesture, "it implies no end of giving up. You have to fall into line, and that's why I kept outside it just as long as I could. I don't like standing in a rank, and," he glanced down at his cloth, "I've an inborn objection to wearing uniform."

Agatha laughed as she caught Hastings' eye. She guessed that Sproatly would be sorry for his candor afterwards, but to some extent she understood what he was feeling. It was a revolt against cramping customs and conventionalities, and she partly sympathized with it, though she knew that such revolts are dangerous. Even in the West, those who cannot lead must march in column with the rank and file or bear the consequences of their futile mutiny. It is a hard truth that no man can live as he pleases.

"Restraint," asserted Winifred, "is a wholesome thing, but it's one most of the men I have met are singularly deficient in. That's why they can't be left alone, but must be driven, as they are, in companies. It's their own fault if they now and then find it a little humiliating."

There was a faint gleam in her eyes, at which Sproatly apparently took warning, for he said no more upon that subject, and they talked about other matters until he took his departure an hour or two later. It was the next afternoon when he appeared again and Mrs. Hastings smiled at Agatha as he and Winifred drove away together.

"Thirty miles is a long way to drive in the frost. I suppose you have noticed that she calls him Jim?" Mrs. Hastings commented. "Anyway, there's a good deal of very genuine ability in that young man. He isn't altogether wild."

"His appearance rather suggested it when I first met him," replied Agatha with a laugh. "Was it a pose?"

"No," said Mrs. Hastings reflectively. "I think one could call it a reaction, and it's probable that some very worthy people in the Old Country are to blame for it. Sproatly is not the only young man who has suffered from having too many rules and conventions crammed down his throat. In fact, they're rather plentiful."

Agatha said nothing further, for the little girls appeared just then, and it was not until the next afternoon that she and Mrs. Hastings were again alone together. Then as they drove across the prairie the older woman spoke of the business they had in hand.

"Gregory must keep those men," she said. "There's no doubt that Harry meant to do it, and it would be horribly unfair to turn them loose now when there is absolutely nothing going on. Besides, Tom Moran is a man I'm specially sorry for. As I told you, he left a young wife and a very little child behind him when he came out here."

"One would wonder why he did it," responded Agatha.

"He had to. There seems to be a notion in the Old Country that we earn our money easily, but it's very wrong. We'll take that man's case as an example. He has a little, desolate holding up in the bush of Ontario, a hole chopped out of the forest and studded all over with sawn-off fir-stumps. On it is a little two-roomed log shack. In all probability there isn't a settlement within two or three leagues of the spot. Now, as a rule, a place of that kind won't produce enough to keep a man for several years after he has partially cleared it, and unless he can earn something in the meanwhile he must give it up. Moran, it seems, got heavily into debt with the nearest storekeeper, and had to choose between selling the place or coming out here where wages are higher. Well, you can probably imagine what it must be to the woman who stayed behind in the desolate bush, seeing nobody for weeks together, though I've no doubt that she'd bear it uncomplainingly believing that her husband would come back with enough to clear the debt."

Agatha could imagine the state of affairs in the little home, and a certain indignation against Gregory crept into her heart. She had once liked to think of him as pitiful and chivalrous, and now, it seemed, he was quite willing that this woman should make her sacrifice in vain.

"But why have you taken the trouble to impress this on—me?" she asked.

Mrs. Hastings smiled. "I want you to plead that woman's cause. Gregory may do what you ask him gracefully. That would be much the nicest way out of it."

"The nicest way?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Hastings, "there is another one. Gregory is going to keep Tom Moran, anyway. Harry has one or two friends in this neighborhood who feel it more or less of an obligation on them to maintain his credit."

Agatha felt the blood rise to her face. It was an unpleasant thing to admit, but she fancied that Gregory might yield to judicious pressure when he would not be influenced by either compassion or a sense of equity. It flashed upon her that had Mrs. Hastings believed that she still retained any tenderness for the man, the story of Moran would not have been told to her. The whole situation was horribly embarrassing, but Agatha had courage in her.

"Well," she promised simply, "I will speak to him."

They said nothing more until they approached the Range, and as they drove by the outbuildings Agatha glanced about her curiously. It occurred to her that the homestead did not look quite the same as it appeared when Wyllard was there. A wagon without one wheel stood near the straw pile. A door of the barn hung awkwardly open in a manner which suggested that it needed mending, and the snow had blown inside the building. In the side of one sod and pole structure there was a gap which should have been repaired. Several other things suggested slackness and indifference. She saw Mrs. Hastings frown.

"There is a change in the place already," said her friend. They alighted in another minute or two, and when they entered the house the gray-haired Swedish woman greeted them moodily. She seemed to notice the glance Mrs. Hastings cast around her, and her manner became deprecatory.

"I can't keep things straight now. It is not the same," she complained.

Mrs. Hastings asked if Hawtrey was in, and hearing that he was, turned to Agatha. "Go along and talk to him. I've something to say to Mrs. Nansen," she said.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE PRIOR CLAIM

It was with confused feelings, among which a sense of repugnance predominated, that Agatha walked toward Hawtrey's room. She was not one of the women who take pleasure in pointing out another person's duty, for, while she had discovered that this task is apparently an easy one to some people, she was aware that a duty usually looks much more burdensome when it is laid upon one's self. Indeed, she was conscious just then that one might be shortly thrust upon her, which she would find it very hard to bear, and she became troubled with a certain compunction as she remembered how she had of late persistently driven all thought of it out of her mind.

There was no doubt that she was still pledged to Gregory, and that she had loved him once. Both facts had to be admitted, and it seemed to her that if he insisted she must marry him. Deep down in her there was an innate sense of right and honesty, and she realized that the fact that he was not the man she had once imagined him to be did not release her. It was clear that, if he was about to commit a cruel and unjustifiable action, she was the one person of all others whose part it was to restrain him.

The color was a little plainer in her face than usual when she entered the room where he lay, pipe in hand, in a lounge chair. His attitude of languid ease irritated her. She had seen that there were several things outside which should have had some claim on his attention. A litter of letters and papers lay upon a little table at his side, but the fact that he could not reach them as he lay was suggestive. He did not notice her entrance immediately. He rose, when he saw her, and came forward with outstretched hand.

"I didn't hear you," he said. "This is a pleasure I scarcely anticipated."

Agatha sat down in the chair that he drew out for her near the stove. He noticed that she glanced at the papers on the table, and he laughed.

"Bills, and things of that kind. They've been worrying me for a week or two," he said lightly. He seized the litter, and bundling it together flung it into an open drawer, which he shut with a snap. "Anyway, that's the last of them for to-day. I'm awfully glad you drove over."

Agatha smiled. The action was so characteristic of the man. She had once found no fault with Gregory's careless habits, and his way of thrusting a difficulty into the background had appealed to her. It had suggested his ability to straighten out the trouble when it appeared advisable. Now she told herself that she would not be absurdly hypercritical, and, as it happened, he had given her the lead that she desired.

"I should think that you would have had to give them more attention as wheat is going down," she remarked.

Hawtrey looked at her with an air of reproach. "It must be nearly three weeks since I have seen you, and now you expect me to talk of farming." He made a rueful gesture. "If you quite realized the situation it would be about the last thing you would ask me to do."

Agatha was astonished to remember that three weeks had actually elapsed since she had last met him, and they had only exchanged a word or two then. He had certainly not obtruded himself upon her, for which she was grateful.

"Nobody is talking about anything except the fall in prices just now," she persisted. "I suppose it affects you, too?"

Gregory, who seemed to accept this as a rebuff, looked at her rather curiously, and then laughed.

"It must be admitted that it does. In fact, I've been acquiring parsimonious habits and worrying myself about expenses lately. The expenses have to be kept down somehow, and that's a kind of thing I never took kindly to."

"You feel it a greater responsibility when you're managing somebody else's affairs?" suggested Agatha, who was still awaiting her opportunity.

"Well," replied Hawtrey, in whom there was, after all, a certain honesty, "that's not quite the only thing that has some weight with me. You see, I'm not altogether disinterested. I get a certain percentage—on the margin—after everything is paid, and I want it to be a big one. Things are rather tight just now, and the wretched mortgage on my place is crippling me."

It had slipped out before he quite realized what he was saying, and he saw the girl's look of concern. She now realized what Sproatly had meant.

"You are in debt, Gregory? I thought you had, at least, kept clear of that," she said.

"So I did—for a while. In any case, if Wyllard stays away, and I can run this place on the right lines, I shall, no doubt, get out of it again."

She was vexed that he should speak so selfishly, for it was clear to her that, if Wyllard did not return until another crop was gathered in, it would be because he was held fast among the Northern ice in peril of his life. Then another thought struck her. She had never quite understood why Gregory had been willing to undertake the management of the Range. In view of the probability that Wyllard had plainly told him what to expect concerning herself, she had been greatly puzzled by his acquiescence. But he had made that point clear by admitting that he had been burdened with a load of debt. But why had he incurred debts? The answer came to her as she remembered having heard Mrs. Hastings or somebody else say that he had spent a great deal of money upon his house and the furnishings for it. It brought her a sudden sense of confusion, for as one result of that expenditure he had been forced into doing what she fancied must have been a very repugnant thing. And she had never even crossed his threshold!

"When did you borrow that money?" she asked sharply.

There was no doubt that Gregory was embarrassed, and her heart softened toward him for his hesitation. It was to further her comfort that he had laid that load upon himself, and he was clearly unwilling that she should know it. That counted for much in her favor.

"Was it just before I came out?" she asked again.

Hawtrey made a little sign of expostulation. "You really mustn't worry me about these matters, Aggy. A good many of us are in the storekeepers' or mortgage-jobbers' hands, and there's no doubt that if I have another good year at the Range I shall clear off the debt."

Agatha turned her face away from him for a moment or two. The thing that Gregory had done laid a heavy obligation on her, and she remembered that she had only found fault with him! Even then, stirred as she was, she was conscious that all the tenderness that she had once felt for him had vanished. The duty, however, remained, and with a little effort she turned to him again.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I'm so sorry."

Hawtrey smiled. "I really don't think I deserve a very great deal of pity. As I have said, I'll probably come out all right next year if I can only keep expenses down."

Then Agatha remembered the task that she had in hand. It was a very inauspicious moment to set about it, but that could not be helped, and even for Gregory's own sake she felt that she must win him over.

"There is one way, Gregory, in which I don't think it ought to be done," she said. "You assumed Mr. Wyllard's obligations when you took the farm, and I think you should keep the two Morans."

Hawtrey started. "Ah!" he replied. "Mrs. Hastings has been setting you on; I partly expected it."

"She told me," Agatha admitted. "Unless you will look at the thing as I do, I could almost wish she hadn't. The thought of that man's wife shut up in the woods all winter only to find that what she has had to bear has all been thrown away troubles me. Now Wyllard promised to keep those men on, didn't he?"

"There was no regular engagement so far as I can make out."

"Still, Moran seems to have understood that he was to be kept on."

"Yes," replied Hawtrey, "he evidently does. If the market had gone with us I'd have fallen in with his views. As it hasn't, every man's wages count."

Agatha was conscious of a little thrill of repugnance. Of late Gregory's ideas had frequently jarred on her.

"Does that release you?"

Hawtrey did not answer this.

"I'll keep those men on if you want me to," he promised.

Agatha winced at this. She had discovered that she must not look for too much from Gregory, but to realize that he had practically no sense of moral obligation, and could be influenced to do justice only by the expectation of obtaining her favor positively hurt her.

"I want them kept on, but I don't want you to do it for that reason," she said. "Can't you grasp the distinction, Gregory?"

A trace of darker color dyed Hawtrey's face, but while she was a little surprised at the evidence that he felt her rebuke, he looked at her steadily. He had not thought much about her during the last month, but now the faint scorn in her voice aroused his resentment.

"Now," he said, "there are just three reasons, Aggy, why you should have troubled yourself about this thing. You are, perhaps, a little sorry for Moran's wife, but as you haven't even seen her that can hardly count for much. The next is, that you don't care to see me doing what you regard as a shabby thing; perhaps it is a shabby thing in some respects, but I feel it's justifiable. Of course, if that's your reason there's a sense in which, while not exactly complimentary—it's consoling."

He broke off, and looked at her with a question in his eyes, and it cost Agatha an effort to meet his. She was not prudish or overconscious of her own righteousness, but once or twice, after the shock of her disillusionment in regard to him had lessened, she had dreamed of the possibility of endowing him little by little with some of the qualities she had once fancied he possessed, and, as she vaguely thought of it, rehabilitating him. Now, however, the thing seemed impossible, and, what was more, the desire to bring it about had gone. Hateful as the situation was becoming, she was honest, and she could not let him credit her with a motive that had not influenced her.

In the meanwhile, her very coldness and aloofness stirred desire in the man, and she shrank as she saw a spark of passion kindling in his eyes. She recognized that there was a strain of grossness in him.

"No," she responded, "that reason was not one which had any weight with me."

Hawtrey's face darkened. "Then," he said grimly, "we'll get on to the third. Wyllard's credit is a precious thing to you; sooner than anything should cast a stain on it you would beg a favor from—me. You have set him up on a pedestal, and it would hurt you if he came down. Considering everything, it's a remarkably curious situation."

Agatha grew pale. Gregory was horribly right, for she had no doubt now that he had merely thrust upon her a somewhat distressing truth. It was to save Wyllard's credit, and for that alone, that she had undertaken this most unpleasant task. She did not answer, and Hawtrey stood up.

"Wyllard has his faults, but there's this in his favor—he keeps a promise," he said. "One has a certain respect for a person who never goes back upon his word. Well, because I really think he would like it, I'll keep those men."

He paused for a moment, as if to let her grasp the drift of his words, and then turned to her with something that startled her in his voice and manner. "The question is—are you willing to emulate his example?"

Agatha shrank from the glow in his eyes. "Oh!" she broke out, "you cannot urge me now—after what you said."

Hawtrey laughed harshly. "Well," he said, "I'll come for my answer very shortly. It seems that you and Wyllard attach a great deal of importance to a moral obligation—and I must remind you that the time agreed upon is almost up."

Agatha sat very still for perhaps half a minute, while a sense of dismay took possession of her. There was no doubt that Gregory's retort was fully warranted. She had insisted upon his carrying out an obligation which would cost him something, not because she took pleasure in seeing him do what was honorable, but to preserve the credit of another man. And now it was with intense repugnance that she recognized that there was apparently no escaping from the obligation she had incurred. Gregory's attitude was perfectly natural and logical. She had promised to marry him, and he had saddled himself with a load of debt on her account, but the slight pity and tenderness that she had felt for him a few minutes earlier had utterly disappeared. Indeed, she felt that she almost hated him. His face had grown hard and almost brutal, and there was a look she shrank from in his eyes.

She rose with trembling limbs.

"Do you wish to speak to Mrs. Hastings?" she asked.

Hawtrey's lip curled. "No," he said, "if she'll excuse me, I don't think I do. If you tell her you have been successful, she'll probably be quite content."

Agatha went out without another word. Hawtrey lighted his pipe and stretched himself out in his chair, when he heard the wagon drive away a few minutes later. He did not like Mrs. Hastings, and had a suspicion that she had no great regard for him, but he was conscious of a grim satisfaction. There was, though it seldom came to the surface, a current of crude brutality in his nature, and it was active now. When Agatha had first come from England the change in her had been a shock to him, and it would not have cost him very much to let her go. Since then, however, her coldness and half-perceived disdain had angered him, and the interview which was just past had left him in an unpleasant mood. Though it was, perhaps, the last effect he would have expected, it had stirred him to desire a fulfillment of her pledge. It was consoling to feel that he could exact the keeping of her promise. His face grew coarser as he assured himself of his claim, but he had never realized the shiftiness and instability of his own character. It was his misfortune that the impulses which swayed him one day had generally changed the next.

This became apparent when, having occasion to drive in to the elevators on the railroad a week later, he called at a store to make one or two purchases. The man who kept the store laid a package on the counter.

"I wonder if you'd take this along to Miss Creighton as a favor," he said. "She wrote for the things, and Elliot was to take them out, but I guess he forgot. Anyway, he didn't call."

Hawtrey told the clerk to put the package in his wagon. He had scarcely seen Sally since his recovery, and he suddenly remembered that, after all, he owed her a good deal, and that she was very pretty. Besides, one could talk to Sally without feeling the restraint that Agatha's manner usually laid on him.

The storekeeper laid an open box upon the counter.

"I guess you're going to be married by and by," he said. Hawtrey was thinking of Sally then, and the question irritated him.

"I don't know that it concerns you, but in a general way it's probable," he replied.

"Well," said the storekeeper good-homoredly, "a pair of these mittens would make quite a nice present for a lady. Smartest thing of the kind I've ever seen here; choicest Alaska fur."

Hawtrey bought a pair, and the storekeeper took a fur cap out of another box.

"Now," he said, "this is just the thing she'd like to go with the mittens. There's style about that cap; feel the gloss of it."

Hawtrey bought the cap, and smiled as he swung himself up into his wagon. Gloves are not much use in the prairie frost, and mittens, which are not divided into finger-stalls, will within limits fit almost anybody. This, he felt, was fortunate, for he was not quite sure that he meant to give them to Agatha.

It was bitterly cold, and the pace the team made was slow, for the snow was loose and too thin for a sled of any kind. Night had closed down and Hawtrey was suffering from the cold, when at last a birch bluff rose out of the waste in front of him. It cut black against the cold blueness of the sky and the spectral gleam of snow, but when he had driven a little further a stream of ruddy orange light appeared in the midst of it. A few minutes later he pulled his team up in front of a little log-built house, and getting down with difficulty saw the door open as he approached it. Sally stood in the entrance silhouetted against a blaze of cheerful light.

"Oh!" she cried. "Gregory!"

Hawtrey recognized the thrill in her voice, and took both her hands, as he had once been in the habit of doing.

"Will you let me in?" he asked.

The girl laughed in a strained fashion. She had been a little startled, and was not quite sure yet as to how she should receive him; but Hawtrey drew her in.

"The old folks are out," she said. "They've gone over to Elliot's for supper. He's bringing us a package."

Hawtrey, who explained that he had the parcel, let her hands go, and sat down somewhat limply. He had come suddenly out of the bitter frost into the little, brightly-lighted, stove-warmed room. The comfort and cheeriness of it appealed to him.

"This looks very cozy after my desolate room at the Range," he remarked.

"Then if you'll stay I'll cook you supper. I suppose there's nothing to take you home?"

"No," declared Hawtrey with a significant glance at her, "there certainly isn't, Sally. As a matter of fact, I often wish there was."

He saw her sudden uncertainty, which was, however, not tinged with embarrassment, and feeling that he had gone far enough he went out to put up his team. When he returned there was a cloth on the table, and Sally was busy about the stove. He sat down and watched her attentively. In some respects, he thought she compared favorably with Agatha. She had a nicely molded figure, and a curious lithe gracefulness of carriage which was suggestive of a strong vitality. Agatha's bearing was usually characterized by a certain frigid repose. Then Sally's face was at least as comely as Agatha's, though attractive in a different way, and there was no reserve in it. Sally was what he thought of as human, frankly flesh and blood. Her quick smile was, as a rule, provocative, and never chilled one as Agatha's quiet glances sometimes did.

"Sally," he said, "you've grown prettier than ever."

The girl turned partly towards him with a slow, sinuous movement.

"Now," she replied quickly, "you oughtn't to say those things to me."

Hawtrey laughed; he was usually sure of his ground with Sally.

"Why shouldn't I, when I'm telling the truth?"

"For one thing, Miss Ismay wouldn't like it."

Gregory's face hardened. "I'm not sure she'd mind. Anyway, Miss Ismay doesn't like many things I'm in the habit of doing."

Sally, who had watched him closely, turned away again, but a thrill of exultation ran through her. It had been with dismay she had first heard him speak of his marriage, and she had fled home in an agony of anger and humiliation. That state of mind, however, had not lasted long, and when it became evident that the wedding was postponed indefinitely, she began to wonder whether it was quite impossible that Hawtrey should come back to her. She felt that he belonged to her, although he had never given her any very definite claim on him. She was primitive and passionate, but she was determined, and now that he had done what she had almost expected him to do, she meant to keep him.

"You have fallen out?" she inquired, and contrived to keep the anxiety that she was conscious of out of her voice.

The question, and more particularly the form of it, jarred upon Hawtrey, but he answered it.

"Oh, no," he said. "As a matter of fact, Sally, you can't fall out nicely with everybody. Now when we fell out you got delightfully angry—I don't know whether you were more delightful then or when you graciously agreed to make it up again." He laughed. "I almost wish I could make you a little angry now."

Sally had moved nearer him to take a kettle off the stove, and she looked down on him with her eyes shining in the lamplight. She realized that she would have to fight Miss Ismay for the man; but there was this in her favor—that she appealed directly to one side of his nature, as Agatha, even if she had loved him, could not have attracted him.

"Would you?" she asked. "Dare you try?"

"I might if I was tempted sufficiently."

She leaned upon the table still looking at him mockingly, and she was probably aware that her pose and expression challenged him. Indeed, she could not have failed to recognize the meaning of the sudden tightening of his lips, though she did not in the least shrink from it. She had not the faintest doubt of her ability to keep him at a due distance if it appeared necessary.

"Oh," she taunted, "you only say things."

Hawtrey laughed, and stooping down picked up a package he had brought from the store.

"Well," he said, "after all, I think I'd rather try to please you." He opened the package. "Are these things very much too big for you, Sally?"

The girl's eyes glistened at the sight of the mittens he held out. They were very different from the kind she had been in the habit of wearing, and when he carelessly took out the fur cap she broke into a little cry of delight. Hawtrey watched her with a curious expression. He was not quite sure that he had meant Sally to have the things when he had purchased them, but he was quite contented now. The one gift he had diffidently offered Agatha since her arrival in Canada had been almost coldly laid aside.

In a few minutes Sally laid out supper, and as she waited upon him daintily or filled his cup Hawtrey thrust the misgivings he had felt further behind him. Sally, he thought with a feeling of satisfaction, could certainly cook. When the meal was finished he sat talking about nothing in particular for almost an hour, and then it occurred to him that Sally's mother would be back before very long. She was a person he had no great liking for and he was anxious to go.

"Well," he said, "I must be getting home. Won't you let me see you with that cap on?"

Sally, who betrayed no diffidence, put on the cap, and stood before a dingy mirror with both hands raised while she pressed it down upon her gleaming hair. She flashed a smiling glance at him. It was quite sufficient, and as she turned again Hawtrey slipped forward as softly as he could. She swung around, however, with a flush in her face and a forceful restraining gesture.

"Don't spoil it all, Gregory," she said sharply.

Hawtrey, who saw that she meant it—which was a cause of some astonishment to him—dropped his arms that were held out to embrace her.

"Oh," he said, "if you look at it in that way I'm sorry. Good-night, Sally!"

She let him go, but she smiled when he drove away; and half an hour later she showed the cap and mittens to her mother with significant candor. Mrs. Creighton, who was a severely practical person, nodded.

"Well," she said, "he only wants a little managing if he bought you these, and nobody could say you ran after him."

CHAPTER XX

THE FIRST STAKE

A FORTNIGHT had slipped by since the evening Hawtrey had spent with Sally, when Winifred and Sproatly once more arrived at the Hastings homestead. The girl was looking jaded, and it appeared that the manager of the elevator, who had all along treated her with a great deal of consideration, had insisted upon her going away for a few days when the pressure of business which had followed the harvest had slackened. Sproatly, as usual, had driven her in from the settlement.

When the evening meal was finished they drew their chairs close up about the stove, and Hastings thrust fresh birch billets into it, for there was a bitter frost. Mrs. Hastings installed Winifred in a canvas lounge and wrapped a shawl about her.

"You haven't got warm yet, and you're looking quite worn out," she said. "I suppose Hamilton has still been keeping you at work until late at night?"

"We have been very busy since I was last here," Winifred admitted, and then turned to Hastings. "Until the last week or so there has been no slackening in the rush to sell. Everybody seems to have been throwing wheat on to the market."

Hastings looked thoughtful. "A good many of the smaller men have been doing so, but I think they're foolish. They're only helping to break down prices, and I shouldn't wonder if one or two of the big, long-headed buyers saw their opportunity in the temporary panic. In fact, if I'd a pile of money lying in the bank I'm not sure that

I wouldn't send along a buying order and operate for a rise."

Mrs. Hastings shook her head at him. "No," she said; "you certainly wouldn't while I had any say in the matter. You're rather a good farmer, but I haven't met one yet who made a successful speculator. Some of our friends have tried it—and you know where it landed them. I expect those broker and mortgage men must lick their lips when a nice fat woolly farmer comes along. It must be quite delightful to shear him."

Hastings laughed. "I should like to point out that most of the farmers in this country are decidedly thin, and have uncommonly little wool on them." Then he turned to the others. "I feel inclined to tell you how Mrs. Hastings made the expenses of her Paris trip; it's an example of feminine consistency. She went around the neighborhood and bought up all the wheat anybody had left on hand, or, at least, she made me do it."

Mrs. Hastings, who had means of her own, nodded. "That was different," she declared; "anyway, I had the wheat, and I—knew—it would go up."

"Then why shouldn't other folks sell forward, for instance, when they know it will go down? That's not what I suggested doing, but the point's the same."

"They haven't got the wheat."

"Of course; they wouldn't operate for a fall if they had. On the other hand, if their anticipations proved correct, they could buy it for less than they sold at before they had to deliver."

"That," asserted Mrs. Hastings severely, "is pure gambling. It's sure to land one in the hands of the mortgage jobber."

Hastings smiled at the others. "As a matter of fact, it not infrequently does, but I want you to note the subtle distinction. The thing's quite legitimate if you've only got the wheat in a bag. In such a case you must naturally operate for a rise."

"There's a good deal to be said for that point of view," observed Sproatly. "You can keep the wheat if you're not satisfied, but when you try the other plan the margin that may vanish at any moment is the danger. I suppose Gregory has still been selling the Range wheat, Winifred?"

"I believe we have sent on every bushel."

Sproatly exchanged a significant glance with Hastings, whose face once more grew thoughtful.

"Then," remarked Hastings, "if he's wise he'll stop at that."

Mrs. Hastings changed the subject, and drew her chair closer in to the stove, which snapped and crackled cheerfully.

"It must be a lot colder where Harry is," she said with a shiver.

She flashed a swift glance at Agatha, and saw the girl's expression change, but Sproatly broke in again.

"It was bad enough driving in from the railroad this afternoon," he said. "Winifred was almost frozen. That is why I didn't go round for the pattern mat—I think that's what Creighton said it was—Mrs. Creighton borrowed from you. I met him at the settlement a day or two ago."

Mrs. Hastings said that he could bring it another time, and while the rest talked of something else Winifred turned to Agatha.

"It really was horribly cold, and I almost fancied one of my hands was frost-nipped," she said. "As it happens, I can't buy mittens like your new ones."

"My new ones?" questioned Agatha.

"The ones Gregory bought you."

Agatha laughed. "My dear, he never gave me any."

Winifred looked puzzled. "Well," she persisted, "he certainly bought them, and a fur cap, too. I was in the store when he did it, though I don't think he noticed me. They were lovely mittens—such a pretty brown fur."

Just then Mrs. Hastings, unobserved by either of them, looked up and caught Sproatly's eye. His face became suddenly expressionless, and he looked away.

"When was that?" Agatha asked.

"A fortnight ago, anyway."

Agatha sat silent, and was glad when Mrs. Hastings asked Winifred a question. She desired no gifts from Gregory, but since he had bought the cap and mittens she wondered what he could have done with them. It was disconcerting to feel that, while he evidently meant to hold her to her promise, he must have given them to somebody else. She had never heard of his acquaintance with Sally Creighton, but it struck her as curious that although the six months' delay he had granted her had lately expired, he had neither sent her any word nor called at the homestead.

A few minutes later Mrs. Hastings took up a basket of sewing and moved towards the door. Sproatly, who rose as she approached him, drew aside his chair, and she handed the basket to him.

"You can carry it if you like," she said.

Sproatly took the basket, and followed her into another room, where he sat it down.

"Well?" he said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Mrs. Hastings regarded him thoughtfully. "I wonder if you know what Gregory did with those mittens?"

"I'm rather pleased that I can assure that I don't."

"Do you imagine that he kept them?"

"I'm afraid I haven't an opinion on that point."

"Still, if I said that I felt certain he had given them to somebody you would have some idea as to who it would probably be?"

"Well," confessed Sproatly reluctantly, "if you insist upon it, I must admit that I could make a guess."

Mrs. Hastings smiled in a manner which suggested comprehension. "So could I," she said. "I shouldn't wonder if we both guessed right. Now you may as well go back to the others."

Sproatly, who made no answer, turned away, and he was talking to Agatha when, half an hour later, a wagon drew up outside the door. In another minute or two he leaned forward in amused expectation as Sally walked into the room.

"I'm going on to Lander's, and just called to bring back the mat you lent us," she said to Mrs. Hastings. "Sproatly was to have come for it, but he didn't?"

Sproatly, who said he was sorry, fixed his eyes on her. It was clear to him that Agatha did not understand the situation, but he fancied that Sally was filled with an almost belligerent satisfaction. She was wearing a smart fur cap, and in one hand she carried a pair of new fur mittens which she had just taken off. Sproatly, who glanced at them, noticed that Winifred did the same. Then Mrs. Hastings spoke.

"I don't think you have met Miss Ismay, Sally," she said.

Sally merely acknowledged that she had not been introduced, and Sproatly became more sure that the situation was an interesting one, when Mrs. Hastings formally presented her. It was clear to him that Agatha was somewhat puzzled by Sally's attitude.

As a matter of fact, Agatha, who said that she must have had a cold drive, was regarding the new arrival with a curiosity that she had not expected to feel when the girl first came in. Miss Creighton, she admitted, was comely, though she was clearly somewhat primitive and crude. The long skin coat she wore hid her figure, but her pose was too virile; and there was a look which mystified Agatha in her eyes. It was almost openly hostile, and there was a suggestion of triumph in it. Agatha, who could find no possible reason for this, resented it.

Sally had remained standing, and, as she said nothing further, there was an awkward silence. She was the dominant figure in the room, and the others became sensible of a slight constraint and embarrassment as she gazed at Agatha with unwavering eyes. In fact, it was rather a relief to them when at last she turned to Mrs. Hastings.

"I can't stop. It wouldn't do to leave the team in this frost," said she.

This was so evident that they let her go, and Mrs. Hastings, who went with her to the door, afterwards sat down beside Sproatly a little apart from the rest.

"I've no doubt you noticed those mittens," she commented softly.

"I did," Sproatly admitted. "I think you can rely upon my discretion. If you hadn't wanted this assurance I don't suppose you'd have said anything upon the subject. It, however, seems very probable that Winifred noticed them, too."

"Does that mean you're not sure that Winifred's discretion is equal to your own?"

Sproatly's eyes twinkled. "In this particular case the trouble is that she's animated by a sincere attachment to Miss Ismay, and has, I understand, a rather poor opinion of Gregory. Of course, I don't know how far your views on that point coincide with hers."

"Do you expect me to explain them to you?"

"No," answered Sproatly, "I'm only anxious to keep out of the thing. Gregory is a friend of mine, and, after all, he has his strong points. I should, however, like to mention that Winifred's expression suggests that she's thinking of something."

Mrs. Hastings smiled. "Then I must endeavor to have a word or two with her."

She left him with this, and not long afterwards she and Winifred went out together. When the others were retiring she detained Agatha for a minute or two in the empty room.

"Haven't the six months Gregory gave you run out yet?" she asked.

Agatha said they had, but she spoke in a careless tone and it was evident that she had attached no particular significance to the fact that Sally had worn a new fur cap.

"He hasn't been over to see you since."

The girl, who admitted it, looked troubled. Mrs. Hastings laid a hand upon her shoulder.

"My dear," she said, "if he does come you must put him off."

"Why?" Agatha asked, in a low, strained voice.

"For one thing, because we want to keep you." Mrs. Hastings looked at her with a very friendly smile. "Are you very anxious to make it up with Gregory?" A shiver ran through the girl. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I can't answer you that! I must do what is right!"

To her astonishment, Mrs. Hastings drew her a little nearer, stooped and kissed her.

"Most of us, I believe, have that wish, but the thing is often horribly complex," she said. "Anyway, you must put Gregory off again, if it's only for another month or two. I fancy you will not find it difficult."

She turned away, thus ending the conversation, but her manner had been so significant that Agatha, who did not sleep well that night, decided, if it was possible, to act on the well-meant advice.

It happened that a little dapper man who was largely interested in the land agency and general mortgage business spent that evening with Hawtrey in Wyllard's room at the Range. He had driven around by Hawtrey's homestead earlier in the afternoon, and had deduced a good deal from the state of it, though this was a point he kept to himself. Now he lay on a lounge chair beside the stove smoking one of Wyllard's cigars and unobtrusively watching his companion. There was a roll of bills in his pocket with which Gregory had very reluctantly parted.

"In view of the fall in wheat it must have been rather a pull for you to pay me that interest," he remarked.

"It certainly was," Hawtrey admitted with a rueful smile. "I'm sorry it had to be done."

"I don't quite see how you made it," persisted the other man. "What you got for your wheat couldn't have done much more than cover working expenses."

Hawtrey laughed. He was quite aware that his visitor's profession was not one that was regarded with any great favor by the prairie farmers, but he was never particularly cautious, and he rather liked the man.

"As a matter of fact, it didn't, Edmonds," he confessed. "You see, I practically paid you out of what I get for running this place. The red wheat Wyllard raises generally commands a cent or two a bushel more from the big milling people than anything put on the market round here."

Edmonds made a sign of agreement. He had without directly requesting him to do so led Hawtrey into showing him around the Range that afternoon, and having of necessity a practical knowledge of farming he had been impressed by all that he had noticed. The farm, which was a big one, had evidently been ably managed until a recent date, and he felt the strongest desire to get his hands on it. This, as he knew, would have been out of the question had Wyllard been at home, but with Hawtrey, upon whom he had a certain hold, in charge, the thing appeared by no means impossible.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I suppose he was reasonably liberal over your salary."

"I don't get one. I take a share of the margin after everything is paid."

Edmonds carefully noted this. He was not sure that such an arrangement would warrant one in regarding Hawtrey as Wyllard's partner, but he meant to gather a little more information upon that point.

"If wheat keeps on dropping there won't be any margin at all next year, and that's what I'm inclined to figure on," he declared. "There are, however, ways a man with nerve could turn it to account."

"You mean by selling wheat down."

"Yes," said Edmonds, "that's just what I mean. Of course, there is a certain hazard in the thing. You can never be quite sure how the market will go, but the signs everywhere point to still cheaper wheat next year."

"That's your view?"

Edmonds smiled, and took out of his pocket a little bundle of market reports.

"Other folks seem to share it in Winnipeg, Chicago, New York, and Liverpool. You can't get behind these stock statistics, though, of course, dead low prices are apt to cut the output."

Hawtrey read the reports with evident interest. All were in the same pessimistic strain, and he could not know that the money-lender had carefully selected them with a view to the effect he hoped to produce. Edmonds, who saw the interest in Hawtrey's eyes, leaned towards him confidentially when he spoke again.

"I don't mind admitting that I'm taking a hand in a big bear operation," he said. "It's rather outside my usual business, but the thing looks almost certain."

Hawtrey glanced at him with a gleam in his eyes. There was no doubt that the prospect of acquiring money by an easier method than toiling in the rain and wind appealed to him.

"If it's good enough for you it should be safe," he remarked. "The trouble is that I've nothing to put in."

"Then you're not empowered to lay out Wyllard's money. If that was the case it shouldn't be difficult to pile up a bigger margin than you're likely to do by farming."

Hawtrey started, for the idea had already crept into his mind.

"In a way, I am, but I'm not sure that I'm warranted in operating on the market with it."

"Have you the arrangement you made with him in writing?"

Hawtrey opened a drawer, and Edmonds betrayed no sign of the satisfaction he felt when he was handed an informally worded document. He perused it carefully, and it seemed to him that it constituted Hawtrey a partner in the Range, which was satisfactory. He looked up thoughtfully.

"Now," he said, "while I naturally can't tell what Wyllard contemplated, this paper certainly gives you power to do anything you think advisable with his money. In any case, I understand that he can't be back until well on in next year."

"I shouldn't expect him until late in the summer, anyway."

There was silence for a moment or two, and during it Hawtrey's face grew set. It was unpleasant to look forward to the time when he would be required to relinquish the charge of the Range, and of late he had been wondering how he could make the most of the situation. Then Edmonds spoke again.

"It's almost certain that the operation I suggested can result only one way, and it appears most unlikely that Wyllard would raise any trouble if you handed him several thousand dollars over and above what you had made by farming. I can't imagine a man objecting to that kind of thing."

Hawtrey sat still with indecision in his eyes for half a minute, and Edmonds, who was too wise to say anything, leaned back in his chair. Then Hawtrey turned to the drawer again with an air of sudden resolution.

"I'll give you a check for a couple of thousand dollars, which is as far as I care to go just now," he announced with studied carelessness.

He took a pen, and Edmonds watched him with quiet amusement as he wrote. As a matter of fact, Hawtrey was in one respect, at least, perfectly safe in entrusting the money to him. Edmonds had deprived a good many prairie farmers of their possessions in his time, but he never stooped to any crude trickery. He left that to the smaller fry. Just then he was playing a deep and cleverly thought-out game.

He pocketed the check that Hawtrey gave him, and then discussed other subjects for half an hour or so before he rose to go.

"You might ask them to get my team out. I've some business at Lander's and have ordered a room there," he said. "I'll send you a line when there's any change in the market."

CHAPTER XXI

GREGORY MAKES UP HIS MIND

WHEAT was still being flung on to a lifeless market when Hawtrey walked out of the mortgage jobber's place of business in the railroad settlement one bitter afternoon. He had a big roll of paper money in his pocket, and was feeling particularly pleased with himself, for prices had steadily fallen since he had joined in the bear operation Edmonds had suggested, and the result of it had proved eminently satisfactory. This was why he had just given Edmonds a further draft on Wyllard's bank, with instructions to sell wheat down on a more extensive scale. He meant to operate in earnest now, which was exactly what the broker had anticipated, but in this case Edmonds had decided to let Hawtrey operate alone. Indeed, being an astute and far-seeing man, the broker had gone so far as to hint that caution might be advisable, though he had at the same time been careful to show Hawtrey only those market reports which had a distinctly pessimistic tone. Edmonds was rather disposed to agree with the men who looked forward to a reaction before very long.

Hawtrey glanced about him as he strode down the street. It was wholly unpaved, and deeply rutted, but the drifted snow had partly filled the hollows, and it did not look very much rougher than it would have appeared if somebody had recently driven a plow through it. Along both sides of it ran a rude plank sidewalk, raised a foot or two above the ground, so that foot-passengers might escape the mire of the thaw in spring. Immediately behind the sidewalk squat, weatherbeaten, frame houses, all of much the same pattern, rose abruptly. On some of the houses the fronts, carried up as high as the ridge of the shingled roof, had an unpleasantly square appearance. Here and there a dilapidated wagon stood with lowered pole before a store, but it was a particularly bitter afternoon, and there was nobody out of doors. The place looked desolate and forlorn, with a leaden sky hanging over it and an icy wind sweeping through the streets.

Hawtrey strode along briskly until he reached the open space which divided the little wooden town from the unfenced railroad track. It was strewn with fine dusty snow, and the huge bulk of the grain elevators towered high above it against the lowering sky. A freight locomotive was just hauling a long string of wheat cars out of a sidetrack. The locomotive stopped presently, and though Hawtrey could not see anything beyond the big cars, he knew by the shouts which broke out that something unusual was going on. He was expecting Sally, who was going east to Brandon by a train due in an hour or two.

When the shouts grew a little louder he walked around in front of the locomotive, which stood still with the steam blowing noisily from a valve, and he saw the cause of the commotion. A pair of vicious, half-broken bronchos were backing a light wagon away from the locomotive on the other side of the track, and a fur-wrapped figure sat stiffly on the driving seat. Hawtrey called out and ran suddenly forward as he saw that it was Sally who was in peril.

Just then one of the horses lifted its fore hoofs off the ground, and being jerked back by the pole plunged and kicked furiously, until the other horse flung up its head and the wagon went backward with a run. Then they stopped, and there was a series of resounding crashes against the front of the vehicle. Hawtrey was within a pace or two of the wagon when Sally recognized him.

"Keep off," she cried, "you can't lead them! They don't want to cross the track, but they've got to if I pull the jaws off them."

This was more forcible than elegant, and the shrill harshness of the girl's voice jarred upon Hawtrey, though he was getting accustomed to Sally's phraseology. He understood that she would not have his help, even if it would have been of much avail, which was doubtful, and he reluctantly moved back toward the group of loungers who were watching her.

"I guess you've no call to worry about her," said one of the men. "She's holding them on the lowest notch, and it's a mighty powerful bit fixing. Besides, that girl could drive anything that goes on four legs."

"Sure," said one of the others. "She's a daisy."

Hawtrey was annoyed to notice that in place of being embarrassed Sally evidently rather enjoyed the situation, though several of the freight-train and station hands had now joined the group of loungers and were cheering her on. He had already satisfied himself that she had not a trace of fear. In another moment or two, however, he forgot his slight sense of disapproval, for Sally, sitting tense and strung up on the driving seat with a glow in her cheeks and a snap in her eyes, was wholly admirable. There was lithe grace, strength, and resolution in every line of her fur-wrapped figure. It is possible that her appearance would have been less effective in a drawing-room, but in the wagon she was in her place and in harmony with her surroundings. Lowering sky, gleaming snow, fur-clad men, and even the big, dingy locomotive, all fitted curiously into the scene, and she made an imposing central figure as she contended with the half-tamed team. Hawtrey was conscious of a tumult of emotion as he watched her.

The struggle with the team lasted for several minutes, during which the horses plunged and kicked again, until Sally stood boldly erect a moment while the wagon rocked to and fro. Her tall, straight figure was commanding and her face with a tress of loosened hair streaming out beneath her fur cap was glowing with excitement. Again and again she swung the stinging whip. Then it seemed that the team had had enough, for as she dropped lightly back into the seat the bronchos broke into a gallop, and in another moment the wagon, jolting noisily as it bounced across the track, vanished behind the locomotive. Gregory heard a shout of acclamation as he turned and hurried after it.

Sally drove right through the settlement and back outside it before she could check the horses, and she had just pulled them up in front of the wooden hotel when Hawtrey reached it. He stood beside the wagon holding up his hand to her, and Sally, who laughed, dropped bodily into his arms, which was, as he realized, a thing that Agatha certainly would not have done. He set Sally down upon the sidewalk, and when a man came out to take the team Hawtrey took her into the hotel.

"It was the locomotive that did it," she explained. "They were most too scared for anything, but I hate to be beaten by a team. Ours know too much to try, but I got Haslem to drive me in. I dropped him at Norton's, who'll bring him on."

"He oughtn't to have left you with them," said Hawtrey severely.

Sally laughed. "Well," she replied, "I'd quit driving if I couldn't handle any team you or Haslem could put the harness on."

The hotels in the smaller prairie settlements offer one very little comfort or privacy. As a rule they contain two general rooms, in one of which the three daily meals are served with a punctuality which is as unvarying as the menu. The traveler who arrives a few minutes too late for one meal must wait until the next is ready. The second room usually contains a rusty stove, and a few uncomfortable benches; and there are not infrequently a couple of rows of very small match-boarded cubicles on the floor overhead. The Occident was, however, a notable exception. For one thing, the building was unusually large, and its proprietor had condescended to study the requirements of his guests, who came from the outlying settlements. There were two rooms above the general lounging place on the first floor, one of which was reserved for the wives and daughters of the farmers who drove in long distances to purchase stores or clothing. In the other, dry-goods traveling men were permitted to display their wares, and privileged customers who wished to leave by a train, the departure of which did no correspond with the hotel arrangements, were occasionally supplied with meals.

It was getting dusk when Hawtrey and Sally entered the first of the two rooms, where the proprietor's wife was just lighting the big lamp. The woman smiled at Gregory, who was a favorite of hers.

"Go right along, and I'll bring your supper up in a minute or two," she said. "I guess you'll want it after your drive."

Hawtrey strode on down a short corridor towards the second room, but Sally stopped behind him a moment.

"Is Hastings in town?" she asked. "I thought I saw his new wagon outside."

"His wife is," said the other woman. "She and Miss Ismay drove in to buy some things."

Sally asked no further questions. It was evident that Mrs. Hastings would not start home until after supper, and as the regular hour meal would be ready in about half an hour it seemed certain that she would come back to the hotel very shortly. That left Sally very little time, for she had no desire that Hawtrey should meet either Mrs. Hastings or Agatha until she had carried out the purpose she had in hand. It was at Gregory's special request that she had permitted him to drive in to see her off, and she meant to make the most of the opportunity. She had long ago regretted her folly in running away from his homestead when he lay helpless, but things had changed considerably since then.

When she entered the second room, she said nothing to Hawtrey about what she had heard. The room was cozily warm and brightly lighted, and the little table was laid for two with a daintiness very uncommon on the prairie. It was a change for Sally to be waited on and to have a meal set before her which she had not prepared with her own fingers, and she sank into a chair with a smile of appreciation.

"It's real nice, Gregory," she remarked. "Supper's never quite the same when you've had to stand over the stove ever so long getting it ready." She sighed. "When I have to do that after working hard all day I don't want to eat."

The man felt compassionate. Sally, as he was aware, had to work unusually hard at the desolate homestead where she and her mother perforce undertook a great many duties that do not generally fall to a woman. Creighton, who was getting to be an old man, was of a grasping nature, and hired assistance only when it was indispensable.

"Well," Hawtrey responded, "I'm not particularly fond of cooking either."

Sally glanced at him with a provoking smile, for he had given her a lead. "Then," she asked with a coquettish raising of the eyebrows, "why don't you get somebody else to do it for you?"

This was, as Gregory recognized, almost painfully direct, but there was no doubt that Sally looked very pretty with the faint flush of color in her cheeks and the tantalizing light in her eyes.

"As a matter of fact, that's a thing I've been thinking over rather often the last few months," he said, and he laughed. "It's rather a pity you don't seem to like cooking, Sally."

Sally appeared to consider this. "Oh," she said, "it depends a lot on who it's for."

Hawtrey became suddenly serious for a moment or two. There was no doubt that at one time he would have considered it impossible that he should marry a girl of Sally's description, and even now he had misgivings. He had, however, almost made up his mind, and he was not exactly pleased that the proprietor's wife came in with the meal, and stayed to talk a while.

When the woman went out he watched Sally with close and what he imagined was unobtrusive attention while she ate, and though he was aware of the indelicacy of his scrutiny, he was relieved to find that she did nothing that was actually repugnant to him. There was a certain daintiness about the girl, and her frank appreciation of the good things set before her only amused him. She was certainly much more companionable than Agatha had been since she came out to Canada, and her cheerful laughter had a pleasant ring.

When at last the meal was over Sally bade Gregory draw her chair up to the stove.

"Now," she said, as she pointed to another chair across the room, "you can sit yonder and smoke. I know you want to."

Hawtrey remembered that Agatha did not like tobacco smoke, and always had been inclined to exact a certain conventional deference which he had grown to regard as rather out of place upon the prairie.

"My chair's a very long way off," he objected.

Sally showed no sign of conceding the point as he had expected, and he took out his pipe. He wanted to think, for once more instincts deep down in him stirred in faint protest against what he almost meant to do. There were also several points that required practical consideration, and among them were his financial difficulties, though these did not trouble him so much as they had done a few months earlier. For a minute or two neither of them said anything, and then Sally spoke again.

"You're worrying about something, Gregory," she said.

Hawtrey admitted it. "Yes," he replied, "I am. My place is a poor one, and when Wyllard comes home I shall have to go back to it again. Things would be so much easier for me just now if I had the Range."

The girl looked at him steadily with reproach in her eyes.

"Oh," she said, "your place is quite big enough if you'd only take hold and run it as it ought to be run. You could surely do it, Gregory, if you tried."

The man's resistance grew feebler, as it usually did when his prudence was at variance with his desires. Sally's words were in this case wholly guileless, as he recognized, and they stirred him. He made no comment, however, and she spoke again.

"Isn't it worth while, though there are things you would have to give up?" she asked. "You couldn't go away and waste your money in Winnipeg every now and then."

Hawtrey laughed. "No," he admitted; "I suppose if I meant to make anything of the place that couldn't be done. Still, you see, it's horribly lonely sitting by oneself beside the stove in the long winter nights. I wouldn't want to go to Winnipeg if I had only somebody to keep me company."

He turned towards her suddenly with decision in his face, and Sally lowered her eyes.

"Don't you think you could get anybody if you tried?" she inquired.

"The trouble," said Hawtrey gravely, "is that I have so little to offer. It's a poor place, and I'm almost afraid, Sally, that I'm rather a poor farmer. As you have once or twice pointed out, I don't stay with things. Still, it might be different if there was any particular reason why I should."

He rose, and crossing the room, stood close beside her chair. "Sally," he added, "would you be afraid to take hold and see what you could make of the place and me? Perhaps you could make something, though it would probably be very hard work, my dear."

The blood surged into the girl's face, and she looked up at him with open triumph in her eyes. It was her hour, and Sally, as it happened, was not afaid of anything.

"Oh!" she exclaimed; "you really want me?"

"Yes," said Hawtrey quietly; "I think I have wanted you for ever so long, though I did not know it until lately."

"Then," she said, "I'll do what I can, Gregory."

Hawtrey bent his head and kissed her with a deference that he had not expected to feel, for there was something in the girl's simplicity and the completeness of her surrender which, though the thing seemed astonishing, laid a restraint on him. As he sat down on the arm of her chair with a hand upon her shoulder, he was more astonished still, for she quietly made it clear that she expected a good deal from him. For one thing, he realized that she meant

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him to take and to keep a foremost place among his neighbors, and, though Sally had not the gift of clear and imaginative expression, it became apparent that this was less for her own sake than his. She was, with somewhat crude forcefulness, trying to arouse a sense of responsibility in the man, to incite him to resolute action and wholesome restraint, and, as he remembered what he had hitherto thought of her, a salutary sense of confusion crept upon him.

She seemed to recognize it, for at length she glanced up at him sharply.

"What is it, Gregory? Why do you look at me like that?" she asked.

Hawtrey smiled in a perplexed fashion. Hitherto she had made her appeal through his senses to one side of his nature only. There was no doubt on that point, but now it seemed there were in her qualities he had never suspected. She had desired him as a husband, but it was becoming clear that she would not be content with the mere possession of him. Sally, it seemed, had wider ideas in her mind, and, though the idea seemed almost ludicrous, she wanted to be proud of him.

"My dear," he faltered, "I can't quite tell you—but you have made me heartily ashamed. I'm afraid it's a very rash thing you are going to do."

She looked at him with candid anxiety, and then appeared to dismiss the subject with a smile.

"There is so much I want to say, and it mayn't be so easy—afterwards," she said. "It's a pity the train starts so soon."

"We can get over that difficulty, anyway," said Hawtrey. "I'll come on as far as I can with you, and get back from one of the way stations by the Pacific express."

Sally made no objections, and drawing a little closer to him she talked on in a low voice.

CHAPTER XXII

A PAINFUL REVELATION

A SPRINKLE of snow was driving down the unpaved street before the biting wind, when Mrs. Hastings came out of a store in the settlement and handed Sproatly, who was waiting close by, several big packages.

"You can put them into the wagon, and tell Jake we'll want the team as soon as supper's over," she said. "We're going to stay with Mrs. Ormond to-night, and I don't want to get there too late."

Sproatly took the parcels, and Mrs. Hastings turned to Agatha, who stood a pace or two behind her with Winifred.

"Now," she announced, "if there's nothing else you want to buy we'll go across to the hotel."

They were standing in a big comfortless room in the hotel when Sproatly rejoined them.

"This place is quite shivery," observed Mrs. Hastings. "They generally have the stove lighted in the little room along the corridor. Go and see, Jim."

Sproatly went out. It happened that he was wearing rubber boots, which make very little noise. He proceeded along the dark corridor, and then stopped abruptly when he had almost reached a partly-open door, for he could see into a lighted room. Hawtrey was sitting near the stove on the arm of Sally's chair.

Though he was not greatly surprised, Sproatly drew back a pace or two into the shadow, for it became evident that there were only two courses open to him. He could judiciously announce his presence by making the door rattle, and then go in and mention as casually as possible that Mrs. Hastings and Agatha were in the hotel. He felt that he ought to do it, but there was the difficulty that he could not warn Hawtrey without embarrassing Sally. Sproatly hesitated in honest doubt as it became evident that the situation was a delicate one. He decided on the alternative. He would go back quietly, and keep Mrs. Hastings out of the room if it could be done.

"I think you would be just as comfortable where you are," he informed her when he joined the others.

"I'm rather doubtful," declared Mrs. Hastings. "Wasn't the stove lighted?"

"Yes," answered Sproatly, "I fancy it was."

"But I sent you to make sure."

"The fact is, I didn't go in," said Sproatly uneasily. "There's somebody in the room already."

"Any of the boys would go out if they knew we wanted it."

"Oh, yes," acquiesced Sproatly. "Still, you see, it's only a small room, and one of them has been smoking."

Mrs. Hastings flashed a keen glance at him, and then smiled in a manner he did not like. It suggested that while she yielded to his objections she had by no means abandoned the subject.

"Well," she said, "what shall we do until supper? This stove won't draw properly, and I don't feel inclined to sit shivering here."

Then Sproatly was seized by what proved to be a singularly unfortunate inspiration.

"It's really not snowing much, and we'll go down to the depôt and watch the Atlantic express come in," he suggested. "It's one of the things everybody does."

This was, as a matter of fact, correct. There are not many amusements open to the inhabitants of the smaller settlements along the railroad track, and the arrival of the infrequent trains is a source of unflagging interest. Mrs. Hastings fell in with the suggestion, and Sproatly was congratulating himself upon his diplomacy, when Agatha stopped as they reached the door of the hotel.

"Oh," she said, "I've only brought one of my mittens."

"I'll go back for the other," responded Sproatly promptly.

"You don't know where I left it."

"Then I'll lend you one of mine. It will certainly go on," the man persisted.

Agatha objected to this, and Sproatly, who fancied that Mrs. Hastings was watching him, let her go, after which he and the others moved out into the street. Agatha ran back to the room they had left, and, finding the mitten, had reached the head of the stairway when she heard voices behind her in the corridor. She recognized them, and turned in sudden astonishment. Standing in the shadow she involuntarily waited. Not far away a stream of light from the door of the room shone out into the corridor. Next moment Hawtrey and Sally approached the door, and as the light fell upon them the blood surged into Agatha's face, for she remembered the embarrassment in Sproatly's manner, and that he had done all he could to prevent her from going back for the mitten.

Hawtrey spoke to Sally, and there was no doubt whatever that he called her "My dear." Filled with burning indignation, Agatha stood still for a moment and they were almost upon her before she turned and fled precipitately down the stairway. She felt that this was horribly undignified, but she could not stay and face them. When she overtook the others she had recovered her outward composure, and they went on together toward the track. As yet she was conscious only of anger at Gregory's treachery. That feeling possessed her too completely for her to be conscious of anything else.

Cold as it was, there were a good many loungers in the station, and Sproatly, who spoke to one or two of them, led his party away from the little shed where they loitered, and walked briskly up and down beside the track until a speck of blinking light rose out of the white wilderness. The light grew rapidly larger, until they could make out a trail of smoke behind it, and the roar of wheels rose in a long crescendo. Then a bell commenced to toll, and the blaze of a big lamp beat into their faces as the great locomotive came clanking into the station.

The locomotive stopped, and the light from the long car windows fell upon the groups of watching fur-clad men, while here and there a shadowy object that showed black against it leaned out from a platform. There was, however, no sign of any passengers for the train until at the last moment two figures appeared hurrying along. They drew nearer, and Agatha set her lips tight as she recognized them, for the light from a vestibule shone into Hawtrey's face as he half lifted Sally on to one of the platforms and sprang up after her. Then the bell tolled again, and the train slid slowly out of the station with its lights flashing upon the snow.

Agatha turned away abruptly and walked a little apart from the rest. The thing, she felt, admitted of only one explanation. Sproatly's diplomacy had had a most unfortunate result, and she was sensible of an intolerable disgust. She had kept faith with Gregory, at least as far as it was possible, and he had utterly humiliated her. The affront he had put upon her was almost unbearable.

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Hastings walked up to Sproatly, who, feeling distinctly uncomfortable, had drawn back judiciously into the shadow.

“Now,” she said, “I understand. You, of course, anticipated this.”

“I didn’t,” declared Sproatly with a decision which carried conviction with it. “I certainly saw them at the hotel, but how could I imagine that they had anything of the kind in view?”

He broke off for a moment, and waved his hand. “After all,” he added, “what right have you to think it now?”

Mrs. Hastings laughed somewhat harshly. “Unfortunately, I have my eyes, but I’ll admit that there’s a certain obligation on me to make quite certain before going any further. That’s why I want you to ascertain where he checked his baggage to.”

“I’m afraid that’s more than I’m willing to undertake. Do you consider it advisable to set the station agent wondering about the thing? Besides, once or twice in my career appearances have been rather badly against me, and I’m not altogether convinced yet.”

Mrs. Hastings let the matter drop, and they went back rather silently to the hotel. As soon as supper was past, Mrs. Hastings bade Sproatly get their wagon out and she drove away with Agatha. During the long, cold journey she said very little to the girl, and they had no opportunity of private conversation when they reached the homestead where they were to spend the night. Agatha hated herself for the thought in her mind, but everything seemed to warrant it, and it would not be driven out. She had heard what Gregory had called Sally at the hotel, and the fact that he must have bought his ticket and checked his baggage earlier in the afternoon when there was nobody about, so that he could run down with Sally at the last moment, evidently in order to escape observation, was very significant.

The two women went home next day, and on the following morning a man, who was driving in to Lander's, brought Mrs. Hastings a note from Sproatly. It was very brief, and ran:

"Gregory arrived same night by Pacific train. It is evident he must have got off at the next station down the line."

Mrs. Hastings showed it to her husband.

"I'm afraid we have been too hasty. What am I to do with this?" she said.

Hastings smiled. "Since you ask my advice, I'd put it into the stove."

"But it clears the man. Isn't it my duty to show it to Agatha?"

"Well," said Hastings reflectively, "I'm not sure that it is your duty to put ideas into her mind when you can't be quite certain that she has entertained them."

"I should be greatly astonished if she hadn't," answered Mrs. Hastings.

Hastings made an expressive gesture. "Oh," he remarked, "you'll no doubt do what you think wisest. When you come to me for advice you have usually made up your mind, and you merely expect me to tell you that you're right."

Mrs. Hastings thought over the matter for another hour or two. For one thing, Agatha's quiet manner puzzled her, and she did not know that the girl had passed a night in agony of anger and humiliation, and had then become conscious of a relief of which she was ashamed. There was, however, no doubt that while Agatha blamed herself in some degree for what had happened, she did feel as if a weight had been lifted from her heart. She was sitting alone in a shadowy room watching the light die off the snowy prairie outside, when Mrs. Hastings came softly in and sat down beside her.

"My dear," said Mrs. Hastings, "it's rather difficult to speak of, but that little scene at the station must have hurt you."

Agatha looked at her quietly and searchingly, but there was only sympathy in her face, and she leaned forward impulsively.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "it hurt me horribly, because I feel it was my fault. I was the cause of it!"

"How could that be?"

"If I had only been kinder to Gregory he would, perhaps, never have thought of that girl. I must have made it clear that he jarred upon me. I drove him"—Agatha turned her face away, while her voice trembled—"into that woman's arms. No doubt she was ready to make the most of the opportunity."

Mrs. Hastings thought that the girl's scorn and disgust were perfectly natural, even though, as it happened, they were not quite warranted.

"In the first place," she suggested, "I think you had better read this note."

Agatha took the note, and there was light enough left to show that the blood had crept into her face when she laid it down again. For almost a minute she sat very still.

"It is a great relief to know that I was wrong—in one respect, but you must not think I hated this girl because Gregory had preferred her to me," she said at last. "When the first shock had passed, there was an almost horrible satisfaction in feeling that he had released me—at any cost. I suppose I shall always be ashamed of that."

She broke off a moment, and her voice was very steady when she went on again:

"Still, what Sproatly says does not alter the case so much after all. It can't free me of my responsibility. If I hadn't driven him, Gregory would not have gone to her."

"You consider that in itself a very dreadful thing?"

Agatha looked at Mrs. Hastings with suddenly lifted head. "Of course," she answered. "Can you doubt it?"

Mrs. Hastings laughed, though there was a little gleam in her eyes, for this was an opportunity for which she had been waiting.

"Then," she said, "you spoke like an Englishwoman—of station—just out from the Old Country—but I'm going to try to disabuse you of one impression. Sally, to put it crudely, is quite good enough for Gregory. In fact, if she had been my daughter I'd have kept him away from her. To begin with, once you strip Gregory of his little surface graces, and his clean English intonation, how does he compare with the men you meet out here? What does his superiority consist of? Is he truer or kinder than you have found most of them to be? Has he a finer courage, or a more resolute endurance—a greater capacity for labor, or a clearer knowledge of the calling by which he makes his living?"

Agatha did not answer. She could not protest that Gregory possessed any of these qualities, and Mrs. Hastings continued:

"Has he even a more handsome person? I could point to a dozen men between here and the railroad, whose clean, self-denying lives have set a stamp on them that Gregory will never wear. To descend to perhaps the lowest point of all, has he more money? We know he wasted what he had—probably in indulgence—and there is a mortgage on his farm. Has he any sense of honor? He let Sally believe he was in love with her before you even came out here, and of late, while he still claimed you, he has gone back to her. Can't you get away from your point of view, and realize what kind of a man he is?"

Agatha turned her head away. "Ah!" she cried, "I realized him—several months ago. They were painful months to me. But you are quite sure he was in love with Sally before I came out?"

"Well," Mrs. Hastings declared, "his conduct suggested it." She laid a caressing hand on the girl's shoulder. "You tried to keep faith with him. Tried desperately, I think. Did you succeed?"

Agatha contrived to meet the older woman's eyes.

"At least, I would have married him."

"Then," asserted Mrs. Hastings, "I can forgive Gregory even his treachery, and you have no cause to pity him. Sally is simple—primitive, you would call her—but she's clever and capable in all practical things. She will bear with Gregory when you would turn from him in dismay, and, when it is necessary, she will not shrink from putting a little judicious pressure on him in a way you could not have done. It may sound incomprehensible, but that girl will lead or drive Gregory very much further than he could have gone with you. She doesn't regard him as perfection, but she loves him."

Mrs. Hastings paused, and for several minutes there was a tense silence in the little shadowy room. It had grown almost dark, and the square of the window glimmered faintly with the dim light flung up by the snow.

Agatha turned slowly in her chair. "Thank you," she said in a low voice. "You have taken a heavy weight off my mind."

She paused a moment, and then added, "You have been a good friend all along. It was supreme good fortune that placed me in your hands."

Mrs. Hastings patted her shoulder, and then went out quietly. Agatha lay still in her chair beside the stove. The fire snapped and crackled cheerfully, but except for the pleasant sound, there was a restful quietness. The room was cozily warm, though its occupant could hear a little icy wind wail about the building. It swept Agatha's thoughts away to the frozen North, and she realized what it had cost her to keep faith with Gregory as she pictured a little snow-sheeted schooner hemmed in among the floes, and two or three worn-out men hauling a sled painfully over the ridged and furrowed ice. The man who had gone up into that great desolation had been endued with an almost fantastic sense of honor, and now he might never even know that she loved him. She admitted that she had loved him for several months.

CHAPTER XXIII

THROUGH THE SNOW

Next morning, the mail-carrier, who, half-frozen and white all over, drove up to the homestead out of a haze of falling snow, brought Agatha a note from Gregory. The note was brief, and Agatha read it with a smile of half-amused contempt, though she admitted that, considering everything, he had handled the embarrassing situation gracefully. This attitude, however, was only what she had expected, and she recognized that it was characteristic of Hawtrey that he had written releasing her from her engagement instead of seeking an interview. Gregory, as she realized now, had always taken the easiest way, and it was evident that he had not even the courage to face her. She quietly dropped the note—it did not seem worth while to fling it—into the stove.

Agatha could forgive Gregory for choosing Sally. Though she was very human in most respects, that scarcely troubled her, but she could not forgive him for persisting in his claim to her while he was philandering—and this seemed the most fitting term—with her rival. Had he only been honest, she would not have let Wyllard go away without some assurance of her regard which would have cheered the brave seafarer on his perilous journey. And it was clear to her that Wyllard might never come back again! Her face grew hard when she thought of it, and she had thought of it frequently. For that double-dealing she felt she almost hated Gregory.

A month passed drearily, with Arctic frost outside on the prairie, and little to do inside the homestead except to cook and gorge the stove, and endeavor to keep warmth in one's body. Water froze solid inside the house, stinging draughts crept in through the double windows, and there were evenings when Mrs. Hastings and Agatha, shivering close beside the stove, waited anxiously for the first sign of Hastings and the hired man, who were bringing back a sled loaded with birch logs from a neighboring bluff. The bluff was only a few miles away, but men sent out to cut fuel in the awful cold snaps in that country have now and then sunk down in the snow with the life frozen out of them. There were other days when the wooden building seemed to rock beneath the buffeting of the icy hurricane, and it was a perilous matter to cross the narrow open space between it and the stables through the haze of swirling snow.

The weather moderated a little by and by, and one afternoon Mrs. Hastings drove off to Lander's with the one hired man that they kept through the winter. Mr. Hastings had set out earlier for the bluff, and as the Scandinavian maid had been married and had gone away, Agatha was left in the house with the little girls.

It was bitterly cold, even inside the dwelling, but Agatha was busy baking, and she failed to notice that the temperature had become almost Arctic, until she stood beside a window as evening was closing in. A low, dingy sky hung over the narrowing sweep of prairie which stretched back, gleaming lividly, into the creeping dusk, but a few minutes later a haze of snow whirled across it and cut off the dreary scene.

The light died out suddenly, and Agatha and the little girls drew their chairs close up to the stove. The house was very quiet, and Agatha could hear the mournful wailing of the wind about it, with now and then the soft swish of driven snow upon the walls and roofing shingles.

The table was laid for supper, and the kettle was singing cheerfully upon the stove, but there was no sign of the other members of the family, and presently Agatha began to feel a little anxious. Mrs. Hastings, she fancied, would stay one night at Lander's, if there was any unfavorable change in the weather, but she wondered what could be detaining Hastings. It was not very far to the bluff, and as he could not have continued chopping in the darkness it seemed to her that he should have reached the homestead.

He did not come, however, and she grew more uneasy as the time slipped by. The wail of the wind grew louder and the stove crackled more noisily. At last one of the little girls rose with a cry that she thought she heard the beat of hoofs. The impression grew more distinct until she was sure that some one was riding toward the homestead, and Agatha heard the hoofbeats, but soon after that the sound ceased abruptly, and she could not hear the rattle of flung-down logs which she had expected. This struck Agatha as curious, since she knew that Hastings generally unloaded the sled before he led the team to the stable. She waited a moment or two, but except for the doleful wind nothing broke the silence now, and when the stillness became oppressive she moved towards the door.

The wind tore the door from her grasp when she opened it, and flung it against the wall with a jarring crash, while a fine powder that stung the skin unbearably drove into her face. For a few moments she could see nothing but a whirling haze, and then, as her eyes became accustomed to the change of light, she dimly made out the blurred white figures of the horses standing still, with the load of birch logs rising a shapeless mass behind them. There seemed to be nobody with the team, and, though she twice called sharply, no answer came out of the falling snow.

Then she recognized the significant fact that the team had come home alone.

It was difficult to close the door, and before she accomplished what was a feat of strength her hands had stiffened and grown almost useless, and the hall was strewn with snow. It was every evident that there was something for her to do. It cost her three or four minutes to slip on a blanket skirt, and soft hide moccasins, with gum boots over them. Muffled in her furs, she opened the door again. When she had contrived to close it, the cold struck through her to the bone as she floundered towards the team. There was nobody to whom she could look for assistance, but that could not be helped. It was evident that some misfortune had befallen Hastings and that she must act wisely and quickly.

The first thing necessary was to unload the sled, and, though the birches seldom grow to any size in a prairie bluff, some of the logs were heavy. She was gasping with the effort when she had flung a few of them down, after which she discovered that the rest were held up by one or two stout poles let into sockets. Try as she would, she could not get them out, and then she remembered that Hastings kept a whipsaw in a shed close by. She contrived to find it, and attacked the poles in breathless haste, working clumsily with mittened hands, until there was a crash and rattle as she sprang clear. Then she started the team, and the rest of the logs rolled off into the snow.

That was one difficulty overcome, but the next appeared more serious. She must find the bluff as soon as possible, and in the snow-filled darkness she could not tell where it lay. Even if she could have seen anything of the kind, there was no landmark on the desolate level waste between it and the homestead. She, however, remembered that she had one guide.

Hastings and his hired man had recently hauled in a great many loads of birch logs, and as they had made a well-worn trail it seemed to her just possible that she might trace it back to the bluff. No great weight of snow had fallen yet.

Before Agatha set out she had a struggle with the team, for the horses evidently had no intention of making another journey if they could help it, but at last she swung them into the narrow riband of trail, and plodded away into the darkness at their heads. It was then that she first clearly realized what she had undertaken. Very little of her face was left bare between her fur cap and collar, but every inch of uncovered skin tingled as if it had been lashed with thorns or stabbed with innumerable needles. The air was thick with a fine powder that filled her eyes and nostrils, the wind buffeted her, and there was an awful cold—the cold that taxes the utmost strength of mind and body of those who are forced to face it on the shelterless prairie.

Still the girl struggled on, feeling with half-frozen feet for the depression of the trail, and grappling with a horrible dismay when she failed to find it. She was never sure to what extent she guided the team, or how far from mere force of habit they headed for the bluff, but as the time went by, and there was nothing before her but the whirling snow, she grew feverishly apprehensive. The trail was becoming fainter and fainter, and now and then she could find no trace of it for several minutes.

The horses floundered on, blurred shapes as white as the haze they crept through, and at length she felt that they were dipping into a hollow. Then a faint sense of comfort crept into her heart as she remembered that a shallow ravine which seamed the prairie ran through the bluff. She called out, and started at the faintness of her voice. It seemed such a pitifully feeble thing. There was no answer, nothing but the soft fall of the horses' hoofs and the wail of the wind, but the wind was reassuring, for the volume of sound suggested that it was driving through a bluff close by.

A few minutes later Agatha cried out again, and this time she felt the throbbing of her heart, for a faint sound came out of the whirling haze. She pulled the horses up, and as she stood still listening, a blurred object appeared almost in front of them. It shambled forward in a curious manner, stopped, and moved again, and in another moment or two Hastings lurched by her with a stagger and sank down into a huddled white heap on the sled. She turned back towards him, and he seemed to look up at her.

"Turn the team," he said.

Agatha obeyed, and sat down beside him when the horses moved on again.

"A small birch I was chopping fell on me," he said. "I don't know whether it smashed my ankle, or whether I twisted it wriggling clear—the thing pinned me down. It is badly hurt anyway."

He spoke disconnectedly and hoarsely, as if in pain, and Agatha, who noticed that one of his gum boots was almost ripped to pieces, realized part of what he must have suffered. She knew that nobody pinned to the ground and helpless could have withstood that cold for more than a very little while.

"Oh," she cried, "it must have been dreadful!"

"I found a branch," Hastings added. "It helped me, but I fell over every now and then. Headed for the homestead. Don't think I could have made it if you hadn't come for me!" He stopped abruptly, and turned to her. "You mustn't sit down. Walk—keep warm—but don't try to lead the team."

Agatha struggled forward as far as the near horse's shoulder. The team slightly sheltered her, and it was a little easier walking with a hand upon a trace. It was a relief to cling to something, for the wind that flung the snow into her face drove her garments against her limbs, so that now and then she could scarcely move. When her strength began to flag, every yard of the homeward journey was made with infinite pain and difficulty. At times she could scarcely see the horses, and again, blinded, breathless and dazed, she stumbled along beside them. She did not know how Hastings was faring, but she half-consciously recognized that if once she let the trace go the sled would slip away from her and she would sink down to freeze.

At last, however, a dim mass crept out of the white haze ahead, and a moment later a man laid hold of her. The man told her that Mrs. Hastings was with him, and that the homestead was close at hand. Agatha learned afterwards that they had reached the house a short time previously and had immediately set out in search of her and Hastings.

She floundered on beside the horses, with another team dimly visible in front of her, until a faint ray of light streamed out into the snow. Then the team stopped, and she had only a hazy recollection of staggering into a lighted room in the homestead and sinking into a chair. What they did with Hastings she did not know, but Mrs. Hastings, who went with her to her room, kissed her before she left her.

Nobody could have faced the snow next morning, and it was several days later when Watson, who had attended Hawtrey after his accident, was brought over. Watson did what he could, but it was several weeks before Hastings could use his injured foot again. Before Hastings recovered, news was sent him of some difficulty in the affairs of a small creamery at a settlement further along the line, in which he and his wife held an interest, and Mrs. Hastings went East to make inquiries respecting it. She took Agatha with her, and one evening after she had finished the business she had in hand they left a little way station by the Pacific train.

The car that they entered was empty except for two persons who sat close together near the middle of it. A big lamp overhead shed a brilliant light, and Agatha started when one of their fellow passengers looked around as she approached him. In another moment she stood face to face with Hawtrey, who had risen, while Sally gazed up at her with a curious expression in her eyes. Agatha was perfectly composed. She felt no sympathy for Hawtrey, who was visibly confused. She was not surprised that he found the situation a somewhat difficult one.

“You have been to Winnipeg?” she asked.

“No,” answered Hawtrey, with evident relief that she had chosen a safe topic, “only to Brandon. Sally has some friends there, and she spends a day or two with them once or twice each winter. Brandon is quite a lively place after the prairie. I went in last night to bring her back.” He turned to his companion, “I think you have met Miss Ismay?”

Agatha was conscious that Sally's eyes were fixed upon her, and that Mrs. Hastings was watching them all with quiet amusement, but she was a little astonished when the girl moved some wraps from the seat opposite her.

“Yes,” she said, “I have. If Miss Ismay doesn't mind, I should like to talk to her.”

Hawtrey's relief was evident, and Agatha glanced at him with a smile that was half-contemptuous. He had carefully kept out of her way since he had written her the note, and now it seemed only natural that, if there was anything to be said, he should leave it to Sally.

"I think I'll go along for a smoke," he observed with evident impatience to leave them, and he retired precipitately.

Mrs. Hastings looked after him, and laughed in a manner that caused Sally to wince.

"He doesn't seem anxious to talk to me," she said. "You can come along to the next car by and by, Agatha."

She moved away, and Agatha, who sat down opposite Sally, looked at her questioningly.

"Well?" she said.

Sally made a little deprecatory gesture. "I've something to say, but it's hard. To begin with, are you very angry with me?"

"No," answered Agatha. "I think I really am a little angry with Gregory, but not altogether because he chose you."

Sally considered this statement for a moment or two before she looked up again.

"Well," she confessed, "not long ago, I wanted to hate you, and I guess I 'most succeeded. It made things easier. Still, I want to say that I don't hate you now." She hesitated a moment. "I'd like you to forgive me."

Agatha smiled. "I can do that willingly," she said.

Sally was disconcerted by her quiet ease of manner and perfect candor. It was evidently not quite what she had looked for.

"Then you were never very fond of him?" she suggested.

"No," answered Agatha reflectively, "since you have compelled me to say it, I don't think now that I ever was really fond of him, though I don't know how I can make that quite clear to you. It was only after I came out here that I—realized—Gregory. It was not the actual man I fell in love with in England."

Sally turned her face away, for Agatha had made her meaning perfectly plain. Somewhat to Sally's astonishment, she showed no sign of resentment.

"Then," Sally responded, "it is way better that you didn't marry him." She paused, and seemed to search for words with which to express herself. "I knew all along all there was to know about Gregory—except that he was going to marry you, and it was some time before I heard that—and I was ready to take him. I was fond of him."

Agatha's heart went out to her. "Yes," she said simply, "it is a very good thing that I let him go." She smiled. "That, however, doesn't quite describe it, Sally."

Gregory's fiancée flushed. "I couldn't have said that, but you don't quite understand yet. I said I knew all there was to know about him—and you never did. You made too much of him in England, and when you came out here you only saw the things you didn't like in him. Still, they weren't the only ones."

Agatha started at this statement, for she realized that part of it was certainly true, and she could admit the possibility of all of it being a fact. Gregory might possess a few good qualities that she had never discovered!

"Perhaps I did," she admitted. "I don't think it matters now."

"They're all of them mixed," persisted Sally. "One can't expect too much, but you can bear with a great deal when you're fond of any one."

Agatha sat silent a while, for she was troubled by a certain sense of wholesome confusion. It seemed to her that

Sally had the clearer vision. Love had given her discernment as well as charity, and, not expecting perfection, it was the man's strong points upon which she fixed her eyes.

"Yes," she replied presently. "I am glad you look at it that way, Sally."

The girl laughed. "Oh!" she said, "I've only seen one man on the prairie who was quite white all through, and I had a kind of notion that he was fond of you."

Agatha sat very still, but it cost her an effort.

Her face asked the question that was in her heart.

"Harry Wyllard," announced Sally.

Agatha made no answer, and Sally changed the subject. "Well," said Sally, "after all, I want you to be friends with me."

"I think you can count on that," replied Agatha with a smile, as she rose to rejoin Mrs. Hastings.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LANDING

The ice among the inlets on the American side of the North Pacific broke up unusually early when spring came round again, and several weeks before Wyllard had expected it the *Selache* floated clear. The crew had suffered little during the bitter winter, for Dampier had kept the men busy splicing gear and patching sails, and they had fitted the schooner with a new mainmast hewn out of a small cedar. None of the sailors had been trained as carpenters, but men who keep the sea for months in small vessels are necessarily handy at repairs, and they had all used ax and saw to some purpose in their time.

Wyllard was satisfied when they thrashed the *Selache* out of the inlet under whole mainsail in a fresh breeze, and when evening came he sat smoking near the wheel. He was in a contemplative mood as the climbing forests and snow-clad heights dropped back astern. He wondered what his friends were doing upon the prairie, and whether Agatha had married Gregory yet. It seemed to him that it was, at least, possible that Agatha was married, for she was one to keep a promise, and it was difficult to believe that Gregory would fail to press his claim. Wyllard's face grew grim as he thought of it, though this was a thing he had done more or less constantly during the winter. He fancied that he might have ousted Gregory if he had remained at the Range, for perhaps unconsciously Agatha had shown him that she was not quite indifferent to him; but that would have been to involve her in a breach of faith which she would probably always have looked back on with regret. In any case he could not have stayed to press his suit. He knew that he would never forget her, but it was not impossible that she might forget him. He realized also, though this was not by comparison a matter of great consequence, that the Range was scarcely likely to prosper under Gregory's management, but that could not be helped, and after all he owed Gregory something. It never occurred to him that he was doing an extravagant thing in setting out upon the search that he had undertaken. He felt that the obligation was laid upon him, and, being what he was, he could not shrink from it.

A puff of spray that blew into his face disturbed his meditations, and when a little tumbling sea splashed in over the weather bow, he helped the others to haul down a reef in the mainsail. That accomplished, he went below and brought out a well-worn chart. The *Selache* drove away to the westwards over a white-flecked sea. This time she carried fresh southerly breezes with her most of the way across the Pacific, and plunged along hove down under the last piece of canvas they dared to set upon her until at last they ran into the fog close in to the Kamtchatkan beaches. Then the wind dropped, and they were baffled by light and fitful breezes, while it became evident that there was ice about.

The day they saw the first big mass of ice gleaming broad across their course on a raw green sea, Dampier got an observation, and they held a brief council in the little cabin that evening. The schooner was hove to then, and lay rolling with banging blocks and thrashing canvas on a sluggish heave of sea.

"Thirty miles off shore," announced Dampier. "If it had been clear enough we'd have seen the top of the big range quite a way further out to sea. Now, it's drift ice ahead of us, but it's quite likely there's a solid block along the beach. Winter holds on a long while in this country. I guess you're for pushing on as fast as you can?"

Wyllard nodded. "Of course," he said, "you'll look for an opening, and work her in as far as possible. Then, if it's necessary, Charly and I and another man will take the sled and head for the beach across the ice. If there's a lane anywhere I would, however, probably take the smallest boat. We might haul her a league or two, anyway, on the sled if the ice wasn't very rough."

He looked at Charly, who acquiesced.

"Well," Charly observed simply, "I guess I'll have to see you through. Now we've made a sled for her I'd take the boat, anyway. We're quite likely to strike a big streak of water when the ice is breaking up."

"There's one other course," declared Dampier; "the sensible one, and that's to wait until it has gone altogether. Seems to me I ought to mention it, though it's not likely to appeal to you."

Wyllard laughed. "From all appearances we might wait a month. I don't want to stay up here any longer than is strictly necessary."

"You'll head north?"

"That's my intention."

"Then," said Dampier, pointing to the chart before them, "as you should make the beach in the next day or two I'll head for the inlet here. As it's not very far you won't have to pack so many provisions along, and I'll give you, say, three weeks to turn up in. If you don't, I'll figure that there's something wrong, and do what seems advisable."

They agreed to that, and when next morning a little breeze came out of the creeping haze, they sailed the *Selache* slowly shorewards among the drifting ice until, at nightfall, an apparently impenetrable barrier stretched gleaming faintly ahead of them. Wyllard turned in soon afterwards and slept soundly. All his preparations had been made during the winter and there was no occasion for new plans. When morning broke he breakfasted before he went out on deck. The boat was already packed with provisions, sleeping-bags, a tent, and two light sled frames, on one of which it seemed possible that they might haul her a few miles. She was very light and small, and had been built for such a purpose as they had in view.

The schooner lay to with backed forestaysail tumbling wildly on a dim, gray sea. Half a mile away the ice ran back into a dingy haze, and there was a low, gray sky to weather. Now and then a fine sprinkle of snow slid across the water before a nipping breeze. As Wyllard glanced to windward Dampier strode up to him.

"I guess you'd better put it off," he said. "I don't like the weather; we'll have wind before long."

Wyllard smiled, and Dampier made a forceful gesture.

"Then," he advised, "I'd get on to the ice just as soon as possible. You're still quite a way off the beach."

Wyllard shook hands with him. "We should make the inlet in about nine days, and if I don't turn up in three weeks you'll know there's something wrong," he said. "If there's no sign of me in another week you can take her home again."

Dampier, who made no further comment, bade them swing the boat over, and when she lay heaving beneath the rail Wyllard and Charly and one Indian dropped into her. It was only a preliminary search they were about to engage in, for they had decided that if they found nothing they would afterwards push further north or inland when they had supplied themselves with fresh stores from the schooner.

They gazed at the *Selache* with grim faces as they pulled away, and Wyllard, who loosed his oar a moment to wave his fur cap when Dampier stood upon her rail, was glad when a fresher rush of the bitter breeze forced him to fix his attention on his task. The boat was heavily loaded, and the tops of the gray seas splashed unpleasantly close about her gunwale. She was running before them, rising sharply, and dropping down into the hollows, out of sight of all but the schooner's canvas, and though this made rowing easier, Wyllard was apprehensive of difficulties when he reached the ice.

His misgivings proved warranted, for the ice presented an almost unbroken wall against the face of which the sea spouted. There was no doubt as to what would happen if the frail craft was hurled upon that frozen mass, and Wyllard, who was sculling, fancied that before the boat could even reach it, there was a probability of her being swamped in the upheaval where the backwash met the oncoming sea. Charly looked at him dubiously.

"It's a sure thing we can't get out there," Charly observed.

Wyllard nodded. "Then," he said, "we'll pull along the edge of it until we find an opening or something to make a lee. The sea's higher than it seemed to be from the schooner."

"We've got to do it soon," Charly declared. "There's more wind not far away."

Wyllard dipped his oar again, and for an hour they pulled along the edge of the ice, for there were now little frothing white tops on the seas.

It was evident that the wind was freshening, and at times a deluge of icy water slopped in over the gunwale. The men were hampered by their furs, and the stores lying about their feet.

The perspiration dripped from Wyllard when they approached a ragged, jutting point. It did not seem advisable to attempt a landing on that side of it, and when a little snow began to fall he looked at his companions.

"I guess we've got to pull her out," said Charly. "Dampier's heaving a reef down; he sees what's working up to windward."

Wyllard could barely make out the schooner, which had apparently followed them, a blurr of dusky canvas against a bank of haze, and then as the boat slid down into a hollow there was nothing but the low-hung, lowering sky. It was evident to him that if they were to make a landing it must be done promptly.

"We'll pull around the point first, anyway," he decided.

A shower of fine snow that blotted out the schooner broke upon them, and the work was arduous. They were pulling to windward now, and it was necessary to watch the seas that ranged up ahead and to handle the boat circumspectly while the freshening breeze blew the spray over them. They had to fight for every fathom, and once or twice the little craft nearly rolled over with them. It became apparent by degrees that, as they could not have reached the schooner had they attempted it, they were pulling for their lives, and that the one way of escape open to them was to find an egress of some kind around the point, the ragged tongue of which was horribly close to lee of them. When the snow cleared for a minute or two, they saw that Dampier had driven the *Selache* further off the ice. The schooner was hove to now, and there was a black figure high up in her shrouds.

A bitter rush of wind hurled the spray about them, and the boat fell off almost beam-on to the sea, in spite of all that they could do. The icy brine washed into the boat, and it seemed almost certain that she would swamp or roll over before they could get way on her. Still, pulling desperately, they drove her around the point. Gasping and dripping they made their last effort. A sea rolled up ahead, and as the boat swung up with it Wyllard had a momentary glimpse of an opening not far away. He shouted to his companions, but could not tell whether they heard and understood him, for after that he was conscious only of rowing savagely until another sea broke into the boat and she struck. There was a crash, and she swung clear with the backwash, with all one side smashed in. Then she swung in again just beyond a tongue of ice over which the froth was pouring tumultuously, and the Indian jumped from the bow. He had the painter with him, and for half a minute, standing in the foam, he held the boat somehow, while they hurled a few of the carefully made-up packages that composed her important freight as far on to the ice as possible.

As Wyllard, who seized one sled frame, jumped, the disabled boat rolled over. He landed on his hands and knees, but in another moment he was on his feet, and he and the Indian clutched at Charly, who drove towards them amid a long wash of foam. They dragged him clear, and as he stood up dripping without his cap a sudden haze of snow whirled about them. There was no sign of the schooner, and they could scarcely see the broken ice some sixty yards away. They had made the landing, wet through, with about half their stores, and it was evident that their boat would not carry them across the narrowest lane of water, even if they could have recovered her. The sea rumbled along the edge of the ice, and they could not tell whether the frozen wall extended as far as the beach. They looked at one another until Wyllard spoke.

“We have got the hand-sled, and some, at least, of the things," he said. "The sooner we start for the beach the sooner we'll get there."

It was a relief to load the sled, and when that was done they put themselves into the hide traces and set off across the ice. Their traveling was arduous work apart from the hauling of the load, for the ice was rough and broken, and covered for the most part with softening snow. They had only gum-boots with soft hide moccasins under them, for snow-shoes are used only in Eastern Canada, and it takes one a long while to learn to walk on them.

Sometimes the three men sank almost knee-deep, sometimes they slipped and scrambled on uncovered ledges, but they pushed on with the sled bouncing and sliding unevenly behind them, until the afternoon had almost gone.

They set up the wet tent behind a hummock, and crouched inside it upon a ground-sheet, while Charly boiled a kettle on the little oil blast stove. The wind hurled the snow upon the straining canvas, which stood the buffeting. When they had eaten a simple meal Charly put the stove out and the darkness was not broken except when one of them struck a match to light his pipe. They had but one strip of rubber sheeting between them and the snow, for the water had gotten into the sleeping bags. Their clothes dried upon them with the heat of their bodies. They said nothing for a while, and Wyllard was half asleep when Charly spoke.

"I've been thinking about that boat," he remarked. "Though I don't know that we could have done it, we ought to have tried to pull her out."

"Why?" asked Wyllard. "She'd have been all to pieces, anyway.

"I'm figuring it out like this. If Dampier wasn't up in the shrouds when we made the landing he'd sent somebody. We could see him up against the sky, but we'd be much less clear to him low down with the ice and the surf about us. Besides, it was snowing quite fast then. Well, I don't know what Dampier saw, but I guess he'd have made out that we hadn't hauled the boat up, anyway. The trouble is that with the wind freshening and it getting thick he'd have to thrash the schooner out and lie to until it cleared. When he runs in again it's quite likely that he'll find the boat and an oar or two. Seems to me that's going to worry him considerable."

Wyllard, drowsy as he was, agreed with this view of the matter. He realized that it would have been quite impossible for Dampier to send them any assistance, and it was merely a question whether they should retrace their steps to the edge of the ice next morning and make him some signal. Against this there was the strong probability that he would not run in, if the gale and snow continued, and the fact that it was desirable to make the beach as soon as possible in case the ice broke up before they reached it. What was rather more to the purpose, Wyllard was quietly determined on pushing on.

"It can't be helped," he said simply. "We'll start for the beach as soon as it's daylight."

Charly made no answer, and the brawny, dark-skinned Siwash, who spoke English reasonably well, merely grunted. Unless it seemed necessary, he seldom said anything at all. Bred to the sea, and living on the seal and salmon, an additional hazard or two or an extra strain on his tough body did not count for much with him. He had been accustomed to sleep wet through with icy water, and to crouch for hours with numbed hands clenched on the steering-paddle while the long sea canoe scudded furiously over the big combers before bitter gale or driving snow. Wyllard, who rolled over, pulled a wet sleeping-bag across him, and after that there was silence in the little rocking tent.

Charly's deductions had been proved correct, for when the breeze freshened Dampier climbed into the shrouds. He had noticed the ominous blackness to windward, and he knew what it meant. That was why he had hauled down a reef in the schooner's mainsail, and now kept the vessel out a little from the ice. As the light faded he found it very difficult to see the boat against the white wash of the seas that recoiled from the ice, but when the snow was whirling about him he decided that she was in some peril unless her crew could pull her around the point. It was evident that this would be a difficult matter, though he had only an occasional glimpse of her now. He waved an arm to the helmsman, who understood that he was to run the schooner in. There was a rattle of blocks as the booms swung out, and as the *Selache* sped away before the rapidly freshening breeze it seemed to Dampier that he saw the boat hurled upon the ice. A blinding haze of snow suddenly shut out everything, and the skipper hastened down to the deck. He stood beside the wheel for several minutes. Gazing forward, he could see nothing except the filmy whiteness and the tops of the seas that had steadily been getting steeper. The schooner was driving furiously down upon the ice, but it was evident that to send Wyllard any assistance was utterly beyond his power. He could have hove to the schooner while he got the bigger boat over, and two men might have pulled towards the ice with the breeze astern of them, but it was perfectly clear that they could have neither made a landing nor have pulled her back again. It was also uncertain whether he and the other man could have brought the schooner round or have gotten more sail off her. He stood still until they heard the wash of the sea upon the ice close to lee of them, and then it was a hard-clenched hand he raised in sign to the helmsman.

"On the wind! Haul lee sheets!" he commanded.

The *Selache* came round a little, heading off the ice, and when she drove away with the foam seething white beneath one depressed rail and the spray whirling high about her plunging bows, there was a tense look in the white men's faces as they gazed into the thickening white haze to lee of her. They thrashed her out until Dampier decided that there was sufficient water between him and the ice, and then stripped most of the sail off her, and she lay to until next morning, when they once more got sail on her and ran in again. The breeze had fallen a little, it was rather clearer, and they picked up the point, though it had somewhat changed its shape. They got a boat over, and the two men who went off in her found a few broken planks, a couple of oars, and Charly's cap washing up and down in the surf. They had very little doubt as to what that meant.

CHAPTER XXV

NEWS OF DISASTER

When the boat reached the schooner Dampier went off with one of the men, and with difficulty contrived to make a landing on the ice only to find it covered with a trackless sheet of slushy snow. Though Dampier floundered shorewards a mile or two, there was nothing except the shattered boat to suggest what had befallen Wyllard and his companions. The skipper, who retraced his steps with a heavy heart, retained little hope of seeing them again. Dampier waited two days until a strong breeze blew him off the ice, which was rapidly breaking up, and he then stood out for the open sea, where he hove the *Selache* to for a week or so. After that he proceeded northward to the inlet Wyllard and he had agreed to.

Dampier was convinced that this was useless, but as the opening was almost clear of ice he sailed the schooner in, and spent a week or two scouring the surrounding country. He found it a desolation, still partly covered with slushy snow, out of which ridges of volcanic rock rose here and there. On two of these spots a couple of days' march from the schooner, he made a depôt of provisions, and piled a heap of stones beside them. At times, when it was clear, he could see the top of a great range high up against the western sky, but those times were rare. For the most part, the wilderness was swept by rain or wrapped in clammy fog.

There was, however, no sign of Wyllard, and at last Dampier, coming back jaded and dejected from another fruitless search, after the time agreed upon had expired, shut himself up alone for a couple of hours in the little cabin. He was certain now that Wyllard and his companions had been drowned while attempting to make a landing on the ice, since they would have joined him at the inlet as arranged had this not been the case. The distance was by no means great, and there were no Russian settlements on that part of the coast. The skipper sat very still with a clenched hand upon the little table, balancing conjecture against conjecture, and then regretfully decided that there was only one course open to him. It was dark when he went up on deck again, but the men were sitting smoking about the windlass forward.

"You can heave some of that cable in, boys," he announced. "We'll clear out for Vancouver at sun-up."

The men said nothing, but they shipped the levers, and Dampier went back to the cabin, for the clank of the windlass and the ringing of the cable jarred upon him.

Early next morning the *Selache* stood out to sea, and once they had left behind them the fog and rain near the coast, she carried fine weather with her across the Pacific. On reaching Vancouver, Dampier had some trouble with the authorities, to whom it was necessary to report the drowning of three of his crew, but he was more fortunate than he expected, and after placing the schooner for sale with a broker, he left the city one evening on the Atlantic train. Three days later he was driving across the prairie towards the Hastings homestead. The members were sitting together in the big general room after supper, when the wagon Dampier had hired swung into sight over the crest of a hill.

It was a still, hot evening, and, as the windows were open wide, a faint beat of hoofs came up across the tall wheat and dusty prairie before the wagon topped the rise.

Hastings, who sat in a cane chair near the window, with his pipe in his hand, looked up as he heard it.

"Somebody driving in," he remarked. "I shouldn't be astonished if it's Gregory. He talked about coming over the last time I saw him."

"If he wants to talk about a deal in wheat, he can stay away," said Mrs. Hastings sharply. "If all one hears is true, he has lost quite a few of Harry's dollars on the market lately."

Hastings looked troubled at this. "I'd sooner think it was his own money he'd thrown away."

"That's quite out of the question. He hasn't any."

"Well," said Hastings, with an air of reflection, "I'll get Sproatly to make inquiries. He'll probably be along with Winifred this evening, and if he finds that Gregory is getting in rather deep I'll have a word or two with him. I can't have him wasting Harry's money, and, as one of the executors, I have a right to protest."

Agatha started at the last word. It had an ominous ring, and she fancied that Hastings had noticed the effect on her, for he glanced at her curiously. Turning from him, she rose and walked to the window.

The wheat stretched across the foreground, tall and darkly green, and beyond it the white grass ran back to the hill, which cut sharply against a red and smoky glow. The sun had gone down some time before, and there was an exhilarating coolness in the air. Somehow the sight reminded her of another evening, when she had looked out across the prairie from a seat at Wyllard's table. Almost a year had passed since then.

The wagon drew nearer down the long slope of the hill, and the beat of hoofs that grew steadily louder in a sharp staccato made the memories clearer. She had heard Dampier riding in the night Wyllard had received his summons, and now she wondered who the approaching stranger was, and what his business could be. She did not know why, but she thought it was not Gregory.

Presently Hastings looked round again. "It's the team Bramfield hires out at the settlement," he said. "None of our friends would get him to drive them in. There seem to be two men in the wagon. Bramfield will be one. I can't make out the other."

Mrs. Hastings, who was evidently becoming curious about the unexpected guest, went to his side, and they stood watching the wagon until Agatha made an abrupt movement.

"It's Captain Dampier!" she exclaimed with foreboding in her voice.

She stood tensely still, with lips slightly parted, and a strained look in her eyes, while Hastings gazed at the wagon for another moment or two.

"Yes," he said, and his voice was harsh, "it's Dampier. The other man's surely Bramfield. Harry's not with him."

He glanced at Agatha, who turned away, and sat down in the nearest chair. She made no comment, and there was an oppressive silence, through which the beat of hoofs and rattle of wheels rang more distinctly.

It seemed a long time before Dampier came in. He shook hands with Agatha and Mrs. Hastings diffidently.

"You remember me?" he asked.

"Of course," answered Mrs. Hastings, with impatience in her tone. "Where's Harry?"

The skipper spread a hard hand out, and sat down heavily.

"That," he said, "is what I have to tell you. He asked me to."

"He asked you to?" questioned Agatha, and though her voice was strained there was relief in it.

Dampier made a gesture, which seemed to beseech her patience.

"Yes," he said, "if—anything went wrong—he told me I was to come here to Mrs. Hastings."

Agatha turned her head away, but Mrs. Hastings saw that she caught her breath before she cried:

"Then something has gone wrong!"

"About as wrong as it could." Dampier met her gaze gravely. "Wyllard and two other men are drowned."

He paused as if watching for words that might soften the dire meaning of his message, and Mrs. Hastings saw Agatha shiver. The girl turned slowly around with a drawn white face. It was, however, Hastings who spoke, almost sternly.

"Go on," he said.

"I'm to tell you all?"

This time it was Agatha who broke in.

"Yes," she replied, with a steadiness that struck the others as being strained and unnatural, "you must tell us all."

Dampier, who appeared to shrink from his task, began awkwardly, but he gained coherence and force of expression as he proceeded. He made them understand something of the grim resolution which had animated Wyllard. He pictured, in terse seaman's words, the little schooner plunging to windward over long phalanxes of icy seas, or crawling white with snow through the blinding fog. His listeners saw the big combers tumbling ready to break short upon the dipping bows, and half-frozen men struggling for dear life with folds of madly thrashing sail. The pictures were necessarily somewhat blurred and hazy, for after all only an epic poet could fittingly describe the things that must be done and borne at sea, and epic poets are not bred in the forecastle. When he reached the last scene he gained dramatic power, and Agatha's face grew white and tense. She saw the dim figures pulling the boat through the flying spray beneath the wall of ice.

"We ran her in," he told them, "with the snow blinding us. It was working up for a heavy blow, and as we'd have to beat her out we couldn't take sail off her. We stood on until we heard the sea along the edge of the ice, and then there was nothing to do but jam her on the wind and thrash her clear. There was only a plank or two of the boat, an oar, and Charly's cap, when we came back again!"

"After all, though the boat was smashed, they might have gotten out," Hastings suggested.

"Well," said Dampier simply, "it didn't seem likely. The ice was sharp and ragged, and there was a long wash of sea. A man's not tough enough to stand much of that kind of hammering."

Agatha's face grew whiter, but Dampier went on again.

"Anyway," he said, "they didn't turn up at the inlet as we'd fixed, and that decided the thing. If Wyllard had been alive, he surely would have been there."

"Isn't it just possible that he might have fallen into the hands of the Russians?" asked Hastings.

"I naturally thought of that, but so far as the chart shows there isn't a settlement within leagues of the spot. Besides, supposing the Russians had got him, how could I have helped him? They'd have sent him off in the first place to one of the bigger settlements in the South, and if the authorities couldn't have connected him with any illegal sealing they'd no doubt have managed to send him across to Japan by and by. In that case, he'd have gotten home without any trouble."

Dampier paused, and it was significant that he turned to Agatha with a deprecatory gesture.

"No," he added, "there was nothing I could do."

It was evident that Agatha acquitted him, but she asked a question.

"Captain Dampier," she said, "had you any expectation of finding those three men when you sailed the second time?"

"No," acknowledged the bronzed sailor, with an impressive calmness, "I hadn't any, and I don't think Wyllard had either. Still, he meant to make quite certain. He felt he had to."

The skipper gazed at Agatha, and saw comprehension in her eyes.

"Yes," she observed with an unsteady voice, "and when you have said that, you could say very little more of any man."

She turned her head away from them, and for a few moments there was a heavy silence in the room. It cost the girl a painful effort to sit still, apparently unmoved, but there was strength in her, and she would not betray her distress. She felt that her grief must be endured bravely. It was almost overwhelming, but there was mingled with it a faint consolatory thrill of pride, for it was clear that the man who had loved her had done a splendid thing. He had given all that had been given him—she knew she would never forget that phrase of his—willingly, and it seemed to her that the traits with which he had been endowed were rare and precious ones. She recognized the steadfast, unflinching courage, and the fine sense of honor which had sent him out on that forlorn hope. Unyielding and undismayed he had gone down to death—she felt sure of that—amid the blinding snow.

Mrs. Hastings set food before Dampier. By and by Sproatly and Winifred arrived and they heard the story. After that Dampier, who had promised to stay with them a day or two, left Wyllard's friends for an hour.

"It seems to me you'll naturally want to talk over things," he said; "if you'll excuse me, I'll take a stroll across the prairie."

He went out, and Hastings looked at each member of the little group with hasty scrutiny.

"Harry's friends are numerous, but we're, perhaps, the nearest, and, as Dampier said, we have to consider things," he observed, speaking with deliberation. "To begin with, there's a certain possibility that he has escaped, after all."

He saw the quick movement that Agatha made, and went on more quickly.

"Gregory, of course, has control of the Range until we have proof of Harry's death, though Wyllard made a proviso that if there was no word of the party within eighteen months after he had sailed, or within six months of the time Dampier had landed him, we could assume it, after which the will he handed me would take effect. This, it is evident, leaves Gregory in charge for some months yet, but it seems to me it's our duty to see he doesn't fling away Harry's property. I've reasons for believing that he has been doing it lately."

He looked at Sproatly, who sat silent a moment or two.

"I'm rather awkwardly placed," Sproatly remarked. "You see, there's no doubt that I'm indebted to Gregory."

Winifred turned to him with impatience in her eyes. "Then," she said severely, "you certainly shouldn't have been, and it ought to be quite clear that nobody wishes you to do anything that would hurt him." She looked at Hastings. "In case the will takes effect, who does the property go to?"

Hastings appeared embarrassed. "That," he objected, "is a thing I'm not warranted in telling you now."

A suggestive gleam flashed into Winifred's eyes, but it vanished and her manner became authoritative when she turned back to Sproatly.

"Jim," she said, "you will tell Mr. Hastings all you know."

Sproatly made a gesture of resignation. "After all," he admitted, "I think it's necessary. Gregory, as I've told you already, put a big mortgage on his place, and, in view of the price of wheat and the state of his crop, it's evident that he must have had some difficulty in meeting the interest, unless—and one or two things suggest this—he paid it with Harry's money. Of course, as Harry gave him a share, there's no reason why he shouldn't do this so long as he does not overdraw that share. There's no doubt, however, that he has lost a good deal of money on the wheat market."

"Has he lost any of Harry's?" Mrs. Hastings asked.

Sproatly hesitated. "I'm afraid it's practically certain."

Winifred broke in. "Yes," she asserted, "he has lost a great deal. Hamilton knows almost everything that's going on, and I got it out of him. He's a friend of Wyllard's, and seems vexed with Gregory."

The others did not speak for a moment or two, and then Mrs. Hastings said:

"Most of us don't keep much in the bank, and that expedition must have cost Harry several thousand dollars. How would Gregory get hold of the money before harvest?"

"Edmonds, who holds his mortgage, would let him have it," Sproatly explained.

"But wouldn't he be afraid of Gregory not being able to pay, if the market went against him?"

Sproatly looked thoughtful. "The arrangement Wyllard made with Gregory would, perhaps, give Edmonds a claim upon the Range if Gregory borrowed any money in his name. I almost think that's what the money-lender is scheming for. The man's cunning enough for anything. I don't like him."

Hastings stood up with an air of resolution. "Yes," he said, "I'm afraid you're quite correct. Anyway, I'll drive over in a day or two, and have a talk with Gregory."

After that they separated. Hastings strolled away to join Dampier.

Sproatly and Winifred walked out on to the prairie. When they had left the house Sproatly turned to his companion.

"Why did you insist upon my telling them what I did?" he asked.

"Oh!" answered Winifred, "I had several reasons. For one thing, when I first came out feeling very forlorn and friendless, it was Wyllard who sent me to the elevator, and they really treat me very decently."

"They?" repeated Sproatly with resentment in his face. "If you mean Hamilton, it seems to me that he treats you with an excess of decency that there's no occasion for."

Winifred laughed. "In any case, he doesn't drive me out here every two or three weeks, though"—she glanced at her companion provokingly—"he once or twice suggested that he would like to."

"I suppose you pointed out his presumption?"

"No," confessed Winifred with an air of reflection, "I didn't go quite so far as that. After all, the man is my employer; I had to handle him tactfully."

"He won't be your employer a week after the implement people open their new depôt," returned Sproatly resolutely. "But we're getting away from the subject. Have you any more reasons for concerning yourself about what Gregory does with Wyllard's property?"

"I've one; I suppose you don't know who he has left at least a part of it to?"

Sproatly started as an idea crept into his mind.

"I wonder if you're right," he said.

"I feel reasonably sure of it." Winifred smiled. "In fact, that's partly why I don't want Gregory to throw any more of Wyllard's money away. You have done all I expect from you."

"Then Hastings is to go on with the thing?"

"Hastings," Winifred assured him, "will fail—just as you would. This is a matter which requires to be handled delicately—and effectively."

"Then who is going to undertake it?"

Winifred laughed. "Oh," she answered, "a woman, naturally. I'm going back by and by to have a word or two with Mrs. Hastings."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RESCUE

WINIFRED'S suspicions soon were proved correct, for Hastings, who drove over to the Range a day or two after her visit, returned home rather disturbed in temper after what he described as a very unsatisfactory interview with Hawtrey.

"I couldn't make the man hear reason," he informed Mrs. Hastings. "In fact, he practically told me that the matter was no concern of mine. I assured him that it concerned me directly as one of the executors of Harry's will, and I'm afraid I afterwards indulged in a few personalities. I expect that blamed mortgage-broker has got a very strong hold on him."

Mrs. Hastings looked thoughtful. "You have never told me anything about the will."

"If I haven't, it wasn't for want of prompting," returned Hastings dryly. "The will was sealed, and handed to me by Harry on the express understanding that it was not to be opened until we had proof that he was dead or until the six months mentioned had expired. If he turned up it would, of course, be handed back to him. He made me promise solemnly that I would not offer the least hint as to its provisions to anybody."

Mrs. Hastings indulged in a shrug indicating resignation. "In that case I suppose I must be content, but he might have made an exception of—me. Anyway, I think I see how we can put what appears to be a little necessary pressure upon Gregory." She turned again to her husband rather abruptly. "After all, is it worth while for me to trouble about the thing?"

Hastings was taken off his guard. "Yes," he said decidedly, "if you can put any pressure on Gregory I guess it would be very desirable to do it as soon as possible."

"Then you think that Harry may turn up, after all?"

"I do," said Hastings gravely, "I don't know why. In any case it's highly desirable that Gregory shouldn't fling his property away."

Mrs. Hastings smiled. "Well," she said, "I'll think over it. "I'll probably get Agatha to see what she can do in the first place."

She saw a trace of uncertainty in her husband's face.

"As you like," he said. "Something must be done, but on the whole I'd rather you didn't trouble Agatha about the matter. It would be wiser."

Mrs. Hastings asked no more questions. She believed that she understood the situation, and she had Agatha's interests at heart, for she had grown very fond of the girl. There was certainly one slight difficulty in the way of what she meant to do, but she determined to disregard it, though she admitted that it might cause Agatha some embarrassment afterward. When she found the girl alone, she sat down beside her.

"My dear," she said, "I wonder if I may ask whether you are quite convinced that Harry is dead?"

She felt that the question was necessary, though it seemed rather a cruel one.

"No," replied Agatha calmly, "I can't quite bring myself to believe it."

"Then, since you heard what Sproatly said, you would be willing to do anything that appeared possible to prevent Gregory throwing Harry's money away?"

"Yes," said Agatha, "I have been thinking about it."

A sparkle of disdainful anger showed in her eyes. "Gregory seems to have been acting shamefully."

"Then as he won't listen to Allen, we must get Sally to impress that fact on him."

"Sally?" questioned Agatha in evident astonishment.

Mrs. Hastings smiled. "I don't think you understand Sally as well as I do. Of course, like the rest of us, she falls a long way short of perfection, and—though it's a difficult subject—there's no doubt that her conduct in leading Gregory on while he was still engaged to you was hardly quite correct. After all, however, you owe her something for that."

"It isn't very hard to forgive her for it," confessed Agatha.

"Well, I want you to understand Sally. Right or wrong, she's fond of Gregory. Of course, I've told you this already, but I must try to make it clear how that fact bears upon the business in hand. Sally certainly fought for him, and there's no doubt that one could find fault with several things she did; but the point is that she's evidently determined on making the most of him now she has got him. In some respects, at least, she's absolutely straight—one hundred cents to the dollar is what Allen says of her—and although you might perhaps not have expected this, I believe it would hurt her horribly to feel that Gregory was squandering money that didn't strictly belong to him."

"Then you mean to make her understand what he is doing?"

"No," replied Mrs. Hastings; "I want you to do it. I've reasons for believing that your influence would go further with her than mine. For one thing, I fancy she is feeling rather ashamed of herself."

Agatha looked thoughtful. She had certainly not credited Sally with possessing any fine sense of honor, but she was willing to accept Mrs. Hastings' assurance.

"The situation," she pointed out, "is rather a delicate one. You wish to expose Gregory's conduct to the girl he is going to marry, though, as you admit, the explanation will probably be painful to her. Can't you understand that the course suggested is a particularly difficult and repugnant one—to me?"

"I've no doubt of it," admitted Mrs. Hastings. "Still, I believe it must be adopted—for several reasons. In the first place, I think that if we can pull Gregory up now we shall save him from involving himself irretrievably. After all, perhaps, you owe him the effort. Then I think that we all owe something to Harry, and we can, at least, endeavor to carry out his wishes. He told what was to be done with his possessions in a will, and he never could have anticipated that Gregory would dissipate them as he is doing."

The least reason, as she had foreseen, proved convincing to Agatha, and she made a sign of concurrence.

"If you will drive me over I will do what I can," she promised.

Now that she had succeeded, Mrs. Hastings lost no time, and they set out for the Creighton homestead next day. Soon after they reached the house she contrived that Sally should be left alone with Agatha. The two girls stood outside the house together when Agatha turned to her companion.

"Sally," she said, "there is something that I must tell you."

Sally glanced at her face, and then walked forward until the log barn hid them from the house. She sat down upon a pile of straw and motioned to Agatha to take a place beside her.

"Now," she observed sharply, "you can go on; it's about Gregory, I suppose."

Agatha, who found it very difficult to begin, though she had been well primed by Hastings on the previous evening, sat down in the straw, and looked about her for a moment or two. It was a hot afternoon, dazzlingly bright, and almost breathlessly still. In front of her the dark green wheat rolled waist-high, and beyond it the vast sweep of grass stretched back to the sky-line. Far away a team and a wagon slowly moved across the prairie, but that was the only sign of life, and no sound from the house reached them to break the heavy stillness.

She finally nerved herself to the effort, and spoke earnestly for several minutes before she glanced at Sally. It was evident that Sally had understood all that had been said, for she sat very still with a hard, set face.

"Oh!" Sally exclaimed, "if I'd thought you'd come to tell me this because you were vexed with me, I'd know what to do."

This was what Agatha had dreaded. It certainly looked as if she had come to triumph over her rival's humiliation, but Sally made it clear that she acquitted her of that intention.

"Still," said Sally, "I know that wasn't the reason, and I'm not mad with—you. It hurts"—she made an abrupt movement—"but I know it's true."

She turned to Agatha suddenly. "Why did you do it?"

"I thought you might save Gregory, if I told you."

"That was all?" Sally looked at her with incredulous eyes.

"No," answered Agatha simply, "that was only part. It did not seem right that Gregory should go against Wyllard's wishes, and gamble the Range away on the wheat market."

She admitted it without hesitation, for she realized now exactly what had animated her to seek this painful interview. She was fighting Wyllard's battle, and that fact sustained her.

Sally winced. "Yes," she agreed, "I guess you had to tell me. He was fond of you. One could be proud of that. Harry Wyllard never did anything low down and mean."

Agatha did not resent her candor. Although this was a thing she would scarcely have credited a little while ago, she saw that the girl felt the contrast between Gregory's character and that of the man whose place he had taken, and regretted it. Agatha's eyes became dim with unshed tears.

"Wyllard, they think, is dead," she said, in a low voice. "You have Gregory still."

Sally looked at her with unveiled compassion, and Agatha did not shrink from it.

"Yes," she declared, with a simplicity that became her, "and Gregory must have someone to—take care of him. I must do it if I can."

There was no doubt that Agatha was stirred. This half-taught girl's quiet acceptance of the burden that many women must carry made her almost ashamed.

"We will leave it to you," she said.

It became evident that there was another side to Sally's character, for her manner changed, and the hardness crept back into her face.

"Well," she admitted, "I'd 'most been expecting something of this kind when I heard that man Edmonds was going to the Range. He has got a pull on Gregory, but he's surely not going to feel quite happy when I get hold of him."

She rose in another moment, and saying nothing further, walked back toward the house, in front of which they came upon Mrs. Hastings. Sally looked at Mrs. Hastings significantly.

"I'm going over to the Range after supper," she said.

Mrs. Hastings drove away with Agatha. She said little to the girl during the journey, but an hour after they had reached the homestead she slipped quietly into Agatha's room. She found her reclining in a big chair sobbing bitterly. She sat down close beside her, and laid a hand upon her shoulder.

"I don't think Sally could have said anything to trouble you like this," she said.

It was a moment or two before Agatha turned a wet, white face toward her, and saw gentle sympathy in her eyes. There was, she felt, no cause for reticence.

"No," she said, "it was the contrast between us. She has Gregory."

Mrs. Hastings showed sympathy and comprehension. "And you have lost Harry—but I think you have not lost him altogether. We do not know that he is dead—but even if it be so, it was all that was finest in him that he offered you. It is yours still."

She sat silent a moment or two before she went on again.

"My dear, it is, perhaps, cold comfort, and I am not sure that I can make what I feel quite clear. Still, Harry was only human, and it is almost inevitable that, had it all turned out differently, he would have said and done things that would have offended you. Now he has left you a purged and stainless memory—one, I think, which must come very near to the reality. The man who went up there—for an idea, a fantastic point of honor—sloughed off every taint of the baseness that hampers most of us in doing it. It was a man changed and uplifted above all petty things by a high chivalrous purpose, who made that last grim journey."

Agatha realized the truth of this. Already Wyllard's memory had become etherealized, and she treasured it as a very fine and precious thing. Still, though he now wore immortal laurels, that would not content her when all her human nature cried out for his bodily presence. She wanted him, as she had grown to love him, in the warm, erring flesh, and the vague, splendid vision was cold and remote. There was a barrier greater than that of crashing ice and bitter water between them.

"Oh!" she cried, "I have felt that. I try to feel it always—but just now it's not enough."

She turned her face away with a bitter sob, and Mrs. Hastings, who stooped and kissed her, went out of the room. The older woman knew that the girl had broken down at last, after months of strain.

It happened that Edmonds, the mortgage-broker, drove over to the Range, and found Hawtrey waiting for him in Wyllard's room. It was early in the evening, and he could see the hired men busy outside tossing prairie hay from the wagons into the great barn. The men were half-naked and grimed with dust, but Hawtrey, who was dressed in store clothes, evidently had taken no share in their labors. When Edmonds came in he turned to the money-lender with anxiety in his face.

"Well?" he questioned brusquely.

"Market's a little stiffer," said Edmonds.

Edmonds sat down and stretched out his hand toward the cigar-box on the table, while Hawtrey waited with very evident impatience.

"Still moving up?" he asked.

Edmonds nodded. "It's the other folks' last stand," he declared. “With the wheat ripening as it’s doing, the flood that will pour in before the next two months are out will sweep them off the market. I was half afraid from your note that this little rally had some weight with you, and that as one result of it you meant to cover now.”

“That,” admitted Hawtrey, “was in my mind.”

“Then,” remarked his companion, “it’s a pity.”

Hawtrey leaned upon the table with hesitation in his face and attitude. He had neither the courage nor the steadfastness to make a gambler, and every fluctuation of the market swayed him to and fro. He had a good deal of wheat to deliver by and by, and he could still secure a very desirable margin if he bought in against his sales now. Unfortunately, however, he had once or twice lost heavily in an unexpected rally, and he greatly desired to recoup himself. Then, he had decided, nothing could tempt him to take part in another deal.

“If I hold on and the market stiffens further I’ll be awkwardly fixed,” he declared. “Wyllard made a will, and in a few months I’ll have to hand everything over to his executors. There would naturally be unpleasantness over a serious shortage.”

Edmonds smiled. He had handled his man cleverly, and had now a reasonably secure hold upon him and the Range, but he was far from satisfied. If Hawtrey made a further loss he would in all probability become irretrievably involved.

“Then,” he pointed out, “there’s every reason why you should try to get straight.”

Hawtrey admitted it. “Of course,” he said. “You feel sure I could do it by holding on?”

Edmonds seldom answered such a question. It was apt to lead to unpleasantness afterwards.

“Well,” he said, “Beeman, and Oliphant, and Barstow are operating for a fall. One would fancy that you were safe in doing what they do. When men of their weight sell forward figures go down."

This was correct, as far as it went, but Edmonds was quite aware that the gentlemen referred to usually played a very deep and obscure game. He had also reasons for believing that they were doing it now. It was, however, evident that Hawtrey's hesitation was vanishing.

"It's a big hazard, but I feel greatly tempted to hang on," he said.

Edmonds, who disregarded his remark, sat smoking quietly. Since he was tolerably certain as to what the result would be, he felt that it was now desirable to let Hawtrey decide for himself, in which case it would be impossible to reproach him afterwards. Wheat, it seemed very probable, would fall still further when the harvest began, but he had reasons for believing that the market would rally first. In that case Hawtrey, who had sold forward largely, would fall altogether into his hands, and he looked forward with very pleasurable anticipation to enforcing his claim upon the Range. In the meanwhile he was unobtrusively watching Hawtrey's face, and it had become evident that in another moment or two his victim would adopt the course suggested, when there was a rattle of wheels outside. Edmonds, who saw a broncho team and a a wagon appear from behind the barn, realized that he must decide the matter without delay.

"As I want to reach Lander's before it's dark I'll have to get on," he said carelessly. "If you'll give me a letter to the broker, I'll send it to him."

Next moment a clear voice rose somewhere outside.

"I guess you needn't worry," it said, "I'll go right in."

Then Sally walked into the room.

Edmonds was disconcerted, but bowed, and then sat down again, quietly determined to wait, for he discovered that there was hostility in the swift glance she flashed at him.

"That's quite a smart team you were driving, Miss Creighton," he remarked.

Sally, who disregarded this, turned to Hawtrey.

"What's he doing here?" she asked.

"He came over on a little matter of business," answered Hawtrey.

"You have been selling wheat again?"

Hawtrey looked embarrassed, for her manner was not conciliatory. "Well," he admitted, "I have sold some."

"Wheat you haven't got?"

Hawtrey did not answer, and Sally sat down. Her manner suggested that she meant thoroughly to investigate the matter, and Edmonds, who would have greatly preferred to get rid of her, decided that as it appeared impossible he would appeal to her cupidity. The Creightons were grasping folk, and he had heard of her engagement to Hawtrey.

"If you will permit me I'll try to explain," he said. "We'll say that you have reason for believing that wheat will go down and you tell a broker to sell it forward at a price a little below the actual one. If other people do the same it drops faster, and before you have to deliver you can buy it in at less than you sold it at. A great deal of money can be picked up that way."

"It looks easy," Sally agreed, with something in her manner which led him to fancy he might win her over. "Of course, prices have been falling. Gregory has been selling down?"

"He has. In fact, there's already a big margin to his credit," declared Edmonds unsuspectingly.

"That is, if he bought in now he'd have cleared—several thousand dollars?"

Edmonds told her exactly how much, and then started in sudden consternation with rage in his heart, for she turned to Hawtrey imperiously.

"Then you'll write your broker to buy in right away," she said.

There was an awkward silence, during which the two men looked at each other until Edmonds spoke.

"Are you wise in suggesting this, Miss Creighton?" he asked.

Sally laughed harshly. "Oh, yes," she replied, "it's a sure thing. And I don't suggest. I tell him to get it done."

She turned again to Hawtrey, who sat very still looking at her with a flush in his face. "Take your pen and give him that letter to the broker now."

There was this in her favor that Hawtrey was to some extent relieved by her persistence. He had not the courage to make a successful speculator, and he had already felt uneasy about the hazard that he would incur by waiting. Besides, although prices had slightly advanced, he could still secure a reasonable margin if he covered his sales. In any case, he did as she bade him, and in another minute or two he handed Edmonds an envelope.

The broker took it from him without protest, for he was one who could face defeat.

"Well," he said, with a gesture of resignation, "I'll send the thing on. If Miss Creighton will excuse me, Ill tell your man to get out my wagon."

He went out, and Sally turned to Hawtrey with the color in her cheeks and a flash in her eyes.

"It's Harry Wyllard's money!" she commented, as she met his glance with flashing eyes.

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE WILDERNESS

A BITTER wind was blowing when Wyllard stood outside the little tent the morning after he had made a landing on the ice. He was to leeward of the straining canvas which partly sheltered him, but the raw cold struck through him to the bone, and he was stiff and sore from his exertions during the previous day. His joints ached unpleasantly, and his clothing had not quite dried upon him. He was conscious of a strong desire to crawl back into the tent and go to sleep again, but that was one it would clearly not be wise to indulge in, since they were, he believed, still some distance off the beach, and the ice might begin to break up at any moment. It stretched away before him, seamed by fissures and serrated ridges here and there, for a few hundred yards, and then was lost in the snow. As he gazed at it he shrank from the prospect of the journey through the frozen desolation.

With a shiver he crawled back into the tent where his two companions were crouching beside the cooking-lamp. The feeble light of its sputtering blue flame touched their faces, which were graver than usual, but Charly looked up as he came in.

"Wind's dropping," announced Wyllard curtly. "We'll start as soon as you have made breakfast. We must try to reach the beach to-night."

Charly made no answer, though the dusky-skinned Siwash grunted, and in a few more minutes they silently commenced their meal, which was promptly finished. They struck the tent, and packed it with their sleeping-bags and provisions upon the sled, and then, taking up the traces, set out across the ice. The light had grown clearer now, and the snow was thinning, but it still whirled about them, and lay piled in drawn-out wreaths to lee of every hummock or ragged ridge. They floundered knee-deep, and in the softer places the weight upon the traces grew unpleasantly heavy. That, however, was not a thing any of them felt the least desire to complain of, and it was indeed a matter of regret to them that they were not harnessed to a heavier burden. There was a snow-wrapped desolation in front of them, and they had lost a number of small comforts and part of their provisions in making a landing. Whether the provisions could be replaced they did not know.

The small supply of food was an excellent reason for pushing on as fast as possible, and they stumbled and floundered forward until late in the afternoon. The ice became more rugged and broken as they proceeded. The snow had ceased, but the drifts which stretched across their path were plentiful, and they were in the midst of one when it seemed to Wyllard, who was leading, that they were sinking much deeper than usual. The snow was over the tops of his long boots, the sled seemed very heavy, and he could hear his comrades floundering savagely. There was a cry behind him, and he was jerked suddenly backwards for a pace or two until he flung himself down at full length in the snow. After that he was drawn back no further, but the strain upon the trace became almost insupportable, and there was still a furious scuffling behind him.

In a moment or two, however, the strain slackened, and looking round, he saw Charly waist-deep in the snow.

Charly struggled out with difficulty, holding on by the trace, but the sled had vanished, and it was with grave misgivings that Wyllard scrambled to his feet. They hauled with all their might, and after a tense effort, that left them gasping, dragged the sled back into sight. Part of its load, however, had been left behind in the yawning hole.

Charly went back a pace or two cautiously until he once more sank to the waist, and they had some trouble in dragging him clear. Then he sat down on the sled, and Wyllard stood still looking at the holes in the snow.

"Did you feel anything under you?" he asked at length in a jarring voice.

"I didn't," said Charly simply. "It was only the trace saved me from dropping through altogether, but if I'd gone a little further I'd have been in the water. Kind of snow bridge over a crevice. We broke it up, and the sled fell through."

Wyllard turned and flung the tent, their sleeping-bags, and the few packages which had not fallen out of the sled, after which he hastily opened one or two of them. His companions looked at them with apprehension in their eyes until he spoke again.

"The provisions may last a week or so, if we cut down rations," he said.

He could not remember afterwards whether anybody suggested it, and he believed that the same idea occurred to all of them at once, but in another moment or two they set about undoing the traces from the sled, anl making them secure about their bodies. For half an hour they made perilous attempt after attempt to recover the lost provisions, and failed. The snow broke through continuously beneath the foremost man, but it did not break away altogether, and they could not tell what lay beneath it when they had drawn him out of the hole. When it became evident that the attempt was useless, sitting on the sled, they held a brief council.

"I guess we don't want to go back," said Charly "It's quite likely we've crossed a good many of these crevices, and the snow's getting soft. Besides, Dampier will have hauled off and headed for the inlet by now."

He spoke quietly, though his face was grave. Pausing a moment, he waved his hand. "It seems to me," he added, "we have got to fetch the inlet while the provisions last."

"Exactly," agreed Wyllard. "Since the chart shows a river between us and it, the sooner we start the better. If the thaw holds, the stream will break up the ice on it."

The Indian, who made no suggestion, grunted what appeared to be concurrence, and they silently set to work to reload the sled. That done, they took up the traces and floundered on again into the gathering dimness and a thin haze of driving snow. Darkness had fallen when they made camp again, and sat, worn-out and aching in every bone, about the sputtering lamp inside the little straining tent. The meal they made was a very frugal one, and they lay down in the darkness after it, for half their store of oil had been left behind in the crevice. They spoke seldom, for the second disaster had almost crushed the courage out of them, and it was clear to all that it would be only by a strenuous effort that they could reach the inlet before their provisions quite ran out. They slept, however, and rising in a stinging frost next morning set out again on the weary march, but it was slow traveling, and at noon they left the tent and poles behind.

"In another few days," said Wyllard, "we'll leave the sled."

They made the beach that afternoon, though the only sign of it was the fringe of more ragged ice and the white slope beyond. A thin haze hung about them heavy with rime, and they could not see more than a quarter of a mile ahead. When darkness fell they scraped out a hollow beneath what seemed to be a snow-covered rock, and sat upon their sleeping-bags. The cooking-lamp gave little heat. Having eaten, they huddled close together with part of their aching bodies upon the sled, but none of them slept much that night, for the cold was severe.

The morning broke clear and warmer, and Wyllard, climbing to the summit of the rock, had a brief glimpse of the serrated summits of a great white range that rose to the west and south. It, however, faded like a vision while he watched it, and turning he looked out across the rolling wilderness that stretched away to the north. Nothing broke its gleaming monotony, and there was no sign of life anywhere in the vast expanse.

They set out after breakfast, breaking through a thin crust of snow, which rendered the march almost insuperably difficult, and they had made a league or two by the approach of night. The snow had grown softer, and the thawing surface would not bear the sled, which sank in the slush beneath. Still, they floundered on for a while after darkness fell, and then lay down in a hollow. A fine rain poured down on them.

Somehow they slept, and, though this was more difficult, got upon their feet again when morning came, for of all the hard things the wanderer in rain-swept bush or frozen wilderness must bear, there is none that tests his powers more than, in the early dawn, the bracing of himself for another day of effort. Comfortless as the night's lair has been, the jaded body craves for such faint warmth as it afforded, and further rest; the brain is dull and heavy, and the aching limbs appear incapable of supporting the weight on them. Difficulties loom appallingly large in the faint creeping light, courage fails, and the will grows feeble. Wyllard and his companions felt all this, but it was clear to them that they could not dally, with their provisions out, and staggering out of camp after a very scanty meal they hauled the sled through the slush for an hour or so. Then they had stopped, gasping, and the Indian slipped out of the traces.

"We've hauled that thing about far enough," said Charly, who dropped the traces, too, and slipped away from the sled.

Wyllard stood looking at them for a moment or two with anxious eyes. It was evident that they could haul the hampering load no further, and he was troubled by an almost insupportable weariness.

"In that case," he said, "you have to decide what you'll leave behind."

They discussed the subject for some minutes, partly because it furnished an excuse for sitting upon the sled, though none of them had much doubt as to the result of the council. It was unthinkable that they should sacrifice a scrap of the provisions. Then, when each man had lashed a light load upon his shoulders with a portion of the cut-up traces, they set out again, and it rained upon them heavily all that day.

During the four following days they were buffeted by a furious wind, but the temperature had risen, and the snow was melting fast, and splashing knee-deep through slush and water they made progress. While he stumbled along with the pack-straps galling his shoulders, Wyllard was conscious of little beyond the unceasing pain in his joints and the leaden heaviness of his limbs. The recollection of that march haunted him like a horrible nightmare long afterwards, when each sensation and incident emerged from the haze of numbing misery. He remembered that he stormed at Charly, who lagged behind now and then in a fit of languid dejection, and that once he fell heavily, and was sensible of a half-conscious regret that he was still capable of going on, when the Indian dragged him to his feet again. They rarely spoke to one another, and noticed nothing beyond the strip of white waste, through which uncovered brown patches commenced to break, immediately in front of them, except when they crossed some low elevation and looked down upon the stretch of dull gray water not far away on one hand. The breeze had swept the ice away, and that was reassuring, because it meant that Dampier would be at the inlet when they reached it, though now and then a horrible fear that their strength would fail them or that their provisions would run out first, crept in.

Their faces had grown gaunt and haggard, and each scanty meal had been cut down to the smallest portion which would keep life and power of movement within them. Still, though the weight of it hampered him almost intolerably, Wyllard clung to the one rifle that they had saved from the disaster at the landing and a dozen cartridges. This was a folly about which he and Charly once had virulent words.

At last they came to a river which flowed across their path, and lay down beside it, feeling that the end was not far away. Except in the eddies and shallows, the ice had broken up, and the stream swirled by in raging flood, thick with heavy masses which it had brought down from its higher reaches. The ice crashed upon the gleaming spurs that here and there projected from the half-thawed fringe, and smashed with a harsh crackling among the boulders, and there was no doubt as to what would befall the stoutest swimmer who might attempt the passage. So far as Wyllard afterwards remembered, none of them said anything when they lay down among the wet stones, but with the first of the daylight they started up stream. The river was not a large one, and it seemed just possible that they might find a means of crossing higher up, though they afterwards admitted that this was a great deal more than they expected.

The ground rose sharply, and the stream flowed out of a deep ravine which they followed. The rocks were of volcanic origin, and some of them had crumbled into heaps of ragged débris. The slope of the ravine became a talus along which it was almost impossible to scramble, and they were forced back upon the boulders and the half-thawed ice in the slacker pools.

They made progress, notwithstanding all the obstacles in their way, and when evening drew near found a little clearer space between rock and river. The Indian had wrenched his knee, and when they stopped to make camp among the rocks it was some little time before he overtook them. He said that he had found the tracks of some animal which he believed had gone up the ravine. What the beast was he did not know, but he was sure that it was, at least, large enough to eat, and that appeared to be of the most importance then. He would not, however, take the rifle. Nothing could compel him to drag himself another rod that night, he said, and the others, who had noticed how he limped, accepted his decision. With an expressionless face he sat down among the stones, and Charly decided that it was Wyllard's part to pick the trail.

"You could beat me every time at trailing or shooting when we went ashore on the American side, and I'm not sorry to let it go at that now," he said.

Wyllard smiled grimly. "And I've carried this rifle a week on top of my other load. You can't shoot when you're dead played out."

They called in the Indian and gave the rifle to him. He gravely pointed to Wyllard.

Charly grinned for the first time in several days.

"Well," he remarked, "in this case I guess I've no objections to let it be as he suggests."

Wyllard resignedly took up the rifle and strode wearily out of camp. There was, he knew, scarcely an hour's daylight left, and already the dimness seemed a little more marked down in the hollow. He, however, found the place where the Indian had seen the animal's track, and as there was a wall of rock on one side, up which he believed the beast could not scramble, he pushed on up stream beside the ice. There was nothing to guide him, but he was a little surprised to feel that his perceptions, which had been dull and dazed for the last few days, were growing clearer. He noticed the different sounds the river made, and picked out the sharp crackle of ice among the stones, though he had hitherto been conscious only of a hoarse, pulsating roar. The rocks also took distinctive shapes instead of looming in blurred masses before his heavy eyes, and he found himself gazing with strained attention into each strip of deeper shadow. Still, though he walked cautiously, there was no sign of any life in the ravine. He was horribly weary, and now and then he set his lips as he stumbled noisily among the stones, but he pushed on beside the water while the deep hollow grew dimmer and more shadowy.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE UNEXPECTED

After a hard tramp Wyllard felt a troublesome dizziness creeping over him, and he sat down upon a boulder with the rifle across his knees. He had eaten little in the last few days, which had been spent in arduous exertion, and now the leaden weariness which he had fought against since morning threatened to overcome him. In addition to this, he was oppressed by a black dejection, which, though his mind had never been clearer, reacted upon his failing physical powers, for it was now evident that he and his companions could not reach the inlet while their provisions held out. There was no longer any doubt that he had involved the two faithful men in disaster, and the knowledge that he had done so was bitter.

With haggard face he sat gazing up the ravine. Although he scarcely imagined that either of the others had expected anything, he shrank from going back as empty-handed as when he had left them. The light was getting very dim, but he could still see the ice fringe upon the pool in front of him, and a mass of rock that rose black against the creeping dusk not very far away. Beyond it on the one side there seemed to be a waste of stones amid which a few wreaths of snow still gleamed lividly. Then a wall of rock scarcely distinguishable in the shadow shut in the hollow.

The hollow was filled with the hoarse roar of the river and the sharp crash and crackle of stream-driven ice, but by and by the worn-out man started as he caught another faint sound which suggested the clink of a displaced stone.

His hands closed hard upon the rifle, but he sat very still, listening with strained attention until he heard the sound again. Then a thrill ran through him, for he was quite certain of its meaning. A stone had rolled over higher up the gorge, and he rose and crept forward, cautiously, keeping the detached rock between him and the upper portion of the ravine. Once or twice a stone clattered noisily beneath his feet, and he stopped for a moment or two, wondering with tense anxiety whether the sound could be heard at any distance through the roar of the river. This was a much more serious business than crawling through the long grass for a shot at the prairie antelope, when in case of success it had seemed scarcely worth while to pack the tough and stringy venison back to the homestead.

By and by he heard the clatter of a displaced stone again, and this time the sound was so distinct and near that it puzzled him. The wild creatures of the waste were, he knew, always alert, and their perception of an approaching danger was wonderful. It seemed strange that the beast he was creeping in upon could not hear him, but he realized that he must face the hazard of detection, since in another few minutes it would be too dark to shoot. He had almost reached the rock by this time, and he shifted his grasp on the rifle, holding it thrust forward in front of him while crouching low he looked down for a spot on which to set his foot each time he moved. It would, he knew, be useless to go any further if a stone turned over now. He was fortunate, however, and, strung up to highest tension, he stole into the deeper gloom behind the rock.

A little pool ran in close beneath the rock, but it was covered with ice and slushy snow. Treading cautiously, he crept across it, and held his breath as he moved out from behind the rock. He stopped suddenly, for a man stood face to face with him scarcely a stone's throw away. The stranger's fur-clad figure cut sharply against a gleaming back of snow, and he held a gun in his hand. Though the light had almost gone, it was evident to Wyllard that he was a white man.

They stood very still for several seconds gazing at each other, and then the stranger dropped the butt of his weapon and called out sharply, uttering words in a tongue that Wyllard did not recognize. Wyllard did not move and the man spoke again. What he said was still unintelligible, but this time Wyllard knew that he was trying German. When he received only a shake of the head as an answer, the stranger tried again. This time is was French that he spoke.

"You can come forward, comrade," he said.

He did not seem to be hostile, and Wyllard, who tossed his rifle into the hollow of his left arm, moved out a pace or two to meet him.

"You are Russian?" he questioned in the language the other had used, for French is freely spoken in parts of Canada.

The man laughed. "That afterwards," he answered. "It is said so. My name is Overweg—Albrecht Overweg. As to you, it appears you do not understand Russian."

Wyllard drew a little nearer, and sat down upon a boulder. Now that the tension had slackened, his weariness had once more become almost insupportable, and he felt that he might need his strength and senses. He was bewildered by the encounter, for it was certainly astonishing in that desolate wilderness to fall in with a man who spoke three civilized languages and wore spectacles.

"No," he replied, after a slight pause, "it is almost the first time I have heard Russian spoken."

"Ah," responded the other, "there is a certain significance in that admission, my friend. May I inquire where you have come from, and what you are doing here?"

Wyllard, who had no desire to give him any information concerning the quest for his lost comrades, pointed towards the east.

"That is where I come from. As to my business at the moment you will excuse me. It is perhaps not a rudeness to ask what is yours."

The stranger laughed. "Caution, it seems, is necessary; and to the east, where you have pointed, there is only the sea. I will, however, tell you my business. It is science, and not"—he seemed to add this with a certain significance—"in any way connected with the administration of the country."

Wyllard was conscious of a vast relief on hearing this, but as he was not quite sure that he could believe it, he felt that prudence was still advisable. In any case, he could not let the stranger go away until he had learned whether there were any more white men with him. He sat still, thinking hard for a moment or two.

"You have a camp somewhere near?" he asked at length.

"Certainly," replied the man. "You will come back with me, or shall I come to yours?"

"There are several of you?"

"Besides myself, two Kamtchadales."

"Then," said Wyllard, "I will come with you. I have left two comrades a little further down the ravine. Will you wait until I bring them?"

The stranger made a sign of assent, and sitting down upon a ledge of rock took out a cigar. Wyllard now felt more sure of him, since it was evident that had he meditated any treachery he would naturally have preferred him to make the visit unattended. In any case, it seemed likely that he would have something to eat in his camp.

Wyllard plodded back down the ravine, and when he returned with his comrades Overweg was still sitting there in the gathering darkness. He greeted them with a wave of his hand, and rising, silently led the way up the hollow until they came in sight of a little tent that glimmered beneath a rock. There was a light inside the tent and two dusky figures were silhoueted against the canvas. Overweg drew the flap back, and the light shone upon his face as he signed them to enter. Wyllard, standing still a moment, looked at him steadily, and then, seeing a reassuring smile, went in.

Overweg called to one of the Kamtchadales, who came in and busied himself about the cooking-lamp. The three famished men sat down with a sense of luxurious content among the skins that were spread upon the ground sheet. After the raw cold outside the tent was very snug and warm. Wyllard said little, however, and Overweg made no attempt at conversation until the Kamtchadale laid out a meal, when he watched his guests with a smile while they ate voraciously. He had stripped off his furs, and with his knees drawn up sat on one of the skins. He was a little, plump, round-faced man, with tow-colored hair, and eyes that gleamed shrewdly behind his spectacles.

"Shall I open another can?" he asked presently.

"No," answered Wyllard. "We owe you thanks enough already. Provisions are evidently plentiful with you."

Overweg nodded. "I have a base camp two or three days' journey back," he explained. "It is possible that I shall make a depôt. We brought our stores up from the south with dog sleds before the snow grew soft, but it is necessary for me to push on further. My business, you understand, is the scientific survey; to report upon the natural resources of the country."

He paused, and his manner changed a little when he went on again. "I have," he added, "to this extent taken you into my confidence, and I invite an equal candor. Two things are evident. You have made a long journey, and your French is not that one hears in Paris."

"First of all," said Wyllard, "I must ask again, are you a Russian?"

Overweg shrugged his shoulders. "My name, which I have told you, is not Slavonic, and it may be admitted that I was born in Bavaria. In the meanwhile, it is true that I have been sent on a mission by the Russian Government."

"I wonder," remarked Wyllard reflectively, "how far you consider your duty towards your employers goes."

Overweg's eyes twinkled. "It covers all that can be ascertained about the geological structure and the fauna of the country, especially the fauna that produce marketable furs. At present I am not convinced that it goes very much further."

It was clear to Wyllard that he was already in this man's hands, since he could not reach the inlet without provisions, and Overweg could, if he thought fit, send back a messenger to the Russian authorities. He was one who could think quickly and make a momentous decision, and he realized that if he could not win the man's sympathy there must be open hostility between them.

"In that case I think I may tell you what has brought me here," he said. "If you have traveled much in Kamtchatka you can, perhaps, help me. To begin with, I sailed from Vancouver, in Canada, nearly a year ago."

It required some time to make his errand clear, and then Overweg looked at him with an inscrutable expression.

"It is," said the scientist, "a tale that in these days one finds some little difficulty in believing. Still, it must be admitted that I am acquainted with one fact which appears to substantiate it."

As he saw the blood rise to Wyllard's forehead he broke off with a laugh.

"My friend," he added, "is it permitted to offer you my felicitations? The men who would attempt a thing of this kind are, I think, singularly rare."

"What is the fact that gives me at least partial credence?" asked Wyllard, impatiently.

"There is a Kamtchadale in my base camp who told me of a place where a white man was buried some distance to the west of us. He spoke of a second white man, but nobody, I understand, knows what became of him."

Wyllard straightened himself suddenly. "You will send for that Kamtchadale?"

"Assuredly. The tale you have told me has stirred my curiosity. As my path lies west up the river valley, we can, if it pleases you, go on for a while together."

Wyllard, who thanked him, turned to Charly with a sigh of relief.

"It seems that we shall not bring those men back, but I think we may find out where they lie," he said.

Charly made no comment, for this was the most he had expected, and a few minutes later there was silence in the little tent when the men lay down to sleep among the skins.

They started at sunrise next morning, and followed the river slowly by easy stages until the man sent back to Overweg's base camp overtook them with another Kamtchadale. Then they pushed on still further inland, and it was a week later when one evening their guide led them up to a little pile of stones upon a lonely ridge of rock.

There were two letters very rudely cut on one of the stones, and Wyllard, who stooped down beside it, took off his cap when he rose.

"There's no doubt that Jake Leslie lies here," he said. Looking at Overweg, he asked, "Your man is sure there was only one white man who buried him?"

Overweg spoke to the Kamtchadale, who answered:

"There was only one white man. It seems he went inland afterwards—at least a year ago."

Wyllard turned to Charly, and his face was very grave. "That makes it certain that two of them have died. There was one left, and he may be dead by this time." He made a forceful gesture. "If one only knew!"

Charly made no answer. He was not a man of education or much imagination, but like others of his kind he had alternately borne many privations in the wilderness, logging, prospecting, trail-cutting about the remoter mines, and at sea. As one result of this there crept into his mind some recognition of what the outcast who lay at rest beside their feet had had to face—the infinite toil of the march, the black despair, the blinding snow, and Arctic frost. He met his leader's gaze with a look of comprehending sympathy.

By what grim efforts and primitive devices their comrade had clung to life for a time, it seemed probable they would never know, but they clearly realized that, though some might call it an illegal raid, or even piracy, it was a work of mercy this outlaw had undertaken when he was cast away. In the command to swing the boats over and face the roaring surf in the darkness of the night he had heard the clear call of duty, and had fearlessly obeyed. His obedience had cost him much, but as the man who had come so far to search for him looked down upon the little pile of stones there in the desolate wilderness, there awoke within him a sure recognition of the fact that this was not the end. That, at least, was unthinkable. His comrade, putting off the half-frozen, suffering flesh, had gone on to join the immortals with his duty done.

It was with warmth at his heart and a slight haziness in his eyes that Wyllard turned away at length, but when he put on his fur cap again he was more determined than ever to carry out the search. There were many perils and difficulties to be faced, but he felt that he must not flinch.

"One man went inland," he said to Overweg. "I must go that way, too."

The little spectacled scientist looked at him curiously.

"Ah," he replied, "the road your comrade traveled is a hard one. You have seen what it leads to."

Then Wyllard gave another a glimpse of the emotion that he generally kept hidden deep in him.

"No," he said, quietly, "the hard road leads further—where we do not know—but one feels that the full knowledge will not bring sorrow when it is some day given to those who have the courage to follow."

Overweg waved a hand as he spoke. "It is not the view of the materialists, but it is conceivable that the materialists may be wrong," he responded. "In this case, however, it is the concrete and practical we have to grapple with, my friend. You say you are going inland to search for that man, and for a while I go that way, but though I have my base camp there is the question of provisions if you come with me."

They discussed the matter until Wyllard suggested that he could replace any provisions his companion supplied him with from the schooner, to which Overweg agreed, and they afterwards decided to send the Siwash and one of the Kamtchadales on to the inlet with a letter to Dampier. The two messengers started next day, when they found a place where the river was with difficulty fordable, and the rest pushed on slowly into a broken and rising country seamed with belts of thin forest here and there. They held westwards for another week, and then one evening made their camp among a few stunted, straggling firs. The temperature had risen in the daytime, but the nights were cold, and when they had eaten their evening meal they were glad of the shelter of the tent. A small fire of resinous branches was sinking into a faintly glowing mass close outside the canvas.

The flap was drawn back, and Wyllard, who lay facing the opening, could see a triangular patch of dim blue sky with a sharp sickle moon hanging low above a black fir branch. The night was clear and still, but now and then among the stunted trees there was a faint elfin sighing that quickly died away again. While still determined, Wyllard was moodily discouraged, for they had seen no sign of human life during the journey, and his reason told him that he might search for years before he found the bones of the last survivor of the party. Still, he meant to search while Overweg was willing to supply him with provisions.

By and by he saw Charly sharply raise his head and gaze towards the opening.

"Did you hear anything outside?" asked Charly.

"It must be the Kamtchadales," Wyllard answered.

"They went back a mile or two to lay some traps."

"Then," said Wyllard, decisively, "it couldn't have been anything."

Charly did not appear satisfied, and it seemed to Wyllard that Overweg was also listening, but there was deep stillness outside now, and he dismissed the matter from his mind. A few minutes later, however, it seemed to him that a shadowy form appeared out of the gloom among the firs and faded into it again. This struck him as very curious, since if it had been one of the Kamtchadales he would have walked straight into camp, but he said nothing to his companions, and there was silence for a while until Charly rose softly to his feet.

"Get out as quietly as you can," he said, as he slipped by Wyllard, who crept after him to the entrance.

When he reached it Wyllard's voice rang out with a startling vehemence.

"Stop right now," he cried, and after a pause, "Nobody's going to hurt you. Walk right ahead."

Wyllard felt his heart beat furiously, for a dusky, half-seen figure materialized out of the gloom, and grew into sharper form as it drew nearer to the sinking fire. The thing was wholly unexpected, almost incredible, but it was clear that the man could understand English, and his face was white. In another moment Wyllard's last doubt vanished, and he sprang forward with a gasp.

"Lewson—Tom Lewson!" he cried.

Charly thrust the man inside the tent, and when somebody lighted a lamp Lewson sat down stupidly and looked at them. His face was gaunt and almost blackened by exposure to the frost, his hair was long, and tattered garments of greasy skins hung about him. There was something that suggested bewildered incredulity in his eyes.

"It's real?" he said, slowly and haltingly. "You have come at last?"

They assured him that this was the case. For a moment or two the man's face was distorted with a strange look and he made a hoarse sound in his throat.

"Lord," he muttered! "if I'm dreaming I don't want to wake."

Charly leaned forward and smote him on the shoulder.

"Shall I hit you like I did that afternoon in the

Thompson House on the Vancouver water front?" he asked.

Then the certainty of the thing seemed to dawn upon the man, for he quivered, and his eyes half closed. After that he straightened himself with an effort.

"I should have known, and I think I did," he said, turning to Wyllard. "Something seemed to tell me that you would come for us when you could."

Wyllard's face flushed, but he made no answer, and it was Charly who asked the next question:

"The others are dead?"

Lewson made an expressive gesture. "Hopkins was drowned in a crevice of the ice. I buried Leslie back yonder."

He broke off abruptly, as though speech cost him an effort, and Wyllard turned to Overweg.

"This is the last of the men I was looking for," he announced.

Overweg quietly nodded. "Then you have my felicitations—but it might be advisable if you did not tell me too much," he remarked. "Afterwards I may be questioned by those in authority."

CHAPTER XXIX

CAST AWAY

Tom Lewson had been an hour in camp before he began the story of his wanderings, and at first, lying propped up on one elbow, with the lamplight on his worn face, he spoke slowly and with faltering tongue.

"We broke an oar coming off the beach that night, and it kind of crippled us," he said. "Twice the boat nearly went back again in the surf, and I don't quite know how we pulled her off. Anyway, one of us was busy heaving out the water that broke into her. It was Jake, I think, and he seemed kind of silly. Once we saw a boat hove up on a sea, but we lost her in the spray, and a long while after we saw the schooner. Just then a comber that broke on board 'most hove us over, and when we had dodged the next two there wasn't a sign of the schooner. After that we knew that we were done, and we just tried to keep her head-to and ease her to the seas."

He stopped a moment, and looked around at the others with troubled eyes, as if trying to marshal uncertain memories. He was a simple sailorman, who contented himself with the baldest narrative; still, two of those who heard him could fill in the things he had not mentioned—the mad lurching of the half-swamped boat, the tense struggle with the oars each time a big frothing comber forged out of the darkness, and the savage desperation of the drenched and half-frozen men cast away with the roaring surf to lee of them and their enemies watching upon the hammered beach.

"It blew hard that night," he continued. "Somehow our little boat lived through it, but there wasn't a sign of the island when morning came—nothing but the combers and the flying haze! Guess the wind must have shifted a few points and drove us by the end of it. Then we found Jake had his head laid open by a sealing club. The sea was getting longer, and as we were too played out to hold the boat to it we got her away before it, and somehow she didn't roll over. I think it was next day, though it might have been longer, when we fetched another island. She just washed up on it, and one of the others pulled me out. There wasn't a sign of anybody on the beach, but there were plenty of skinned holluschickie seals on the slope behind it, and that was fortunate for us."

"You struck nobody on the island?" questioned Wyllard.

"We didn't," Lewson answered simply. "The Russians must have sent a vessel to take off the killers after the last drive of the season a day or two before, for the holluschickie were quite fresh. It was blowing hard and the surf was getting steep, and the men had left quite a few of their things behind them. We found the shacks that the killers lived in, and we made out that winter in one of them."

It occurred to Wyllard that this was a thing very few men except sealers could have done had they been cast ashore without stores or tools to face the awful winter of the North.

"How did you get through?" he asked.

"Well," explained Lewson, "we had a rifle, and the ca'tridges weren't spoilt. The killers hadn't taken their cooking outfit, and by and by we got a walrus in an open lane among the ice. They'd left some gear behind them, but we were most of two days cutting and heaving the beast out with a parbuckle under him. There was no trouble about things keeping in that frost. Besides, we'd the holluschackie blubber to burn, and there was a half-empty bag or two of stores in one of the shacks. No, we hadn't any great trouble in making out."

"You had to stay there until the ice broke up," Charly observed.

"And after. The boat was gone, and we couldn't get away. She broke up in the surf, and we burned what we saved of her. At last a schooner came along, and we hid out across the island until she'd gone away. It was blowing fresh, and hazy, and she just shoved a new gang of killers ashore. There was an Okotsk Russian with them, but he made no trouble for us. He was white, anyway, and it kind of seemed to me he didn't like one of the other men who got hurt that night on the beach."

"Then some of them did get badly hurt?" Wyllard broke in.

"Well," Lewson said, "from what that Russian told us —and we got to understand each other after a time—one of the killers had his ribs broke, and it seems that another would go lame for life. Besides, among other things, there was a white man got his face quite smashed. I saw him with his nose flattened way out to starboard, and one eye canted. He was a boss of some kind. They called him Smirnoff."

Overweg looked up sharply. "Ah," he commented, "Smirnoff. A man with an unsavory name. I have heard of him."

"Anyway," Lewson went on, "we killed seals all the open season with that Russian, and I've no fault to find with him. In fact, I figure that if he could have fixed it he'd have left us on the island that winter, but when a schooner came to take the killers off and collect the skins Smirnoff was on board of her. That"—an ominous gleam crept into Lewson's eyes—"was the real beginning of the trouble. He had us hauled up before him—guess the other man had to tell him who we were—and when I wouldn't answer he slashed me across the face with a dog whip."

Lewson clenched a lean brown fist. "Yes" he added, hoarsely, "I was whipped—but they should have tied my hands first. It was not my fault I didn't have that man's life. It was 'most a minute before three of them pulled me off him, and he was considerably worse to look at then."

There was silence for a minute or two, and Wyllard, who felt his own face grow warm, saw the suggestive hardness in Charly's eyes. Lewson was gazing out into the darkness, but the veins were swollen on his forehead and his whole body had stiffened.

"We'll let that go. I can't think of it," he said, recovering his composure. "They put us on board the schooner, and by and by she ran into a creek on the coast. We were to be sent somewhere to be dealt with, and we knew what that meant, with what they had against us. Well, they went ashore to collect some skins from the Kamtchadales, and at night we cut the boat adrift. We got off in the darkness, and if they followed they never trailed us. Guess they figured we couldn't make out through the winter that was coming on."

So far the story had been more or less connected and comprehensible. It laid no great tax on Wyllard's credulity, and, indeed, all that Lewson described had come about very much as Dampier had once or twice suggested; but it seemed an almost impossible thing that the three men should have survived during the years that followed. Lewson, as it happened, never made that matter very clear. He sat silent for almost a minute before he went on again.

"We hauled the boat out, and hid her among the rocks, and after that we fell in with some Kamtchadales going north," he said. "They took us along, I don't know how far, but they were trapping for furs, and after a time—

I think it was months after—we got away from them. Then we fell in with another crowd, and went on further north with them. They were Koriaks, and we lived with them a long while—a winter and a summer anyway. It was more, perhaps—I can't remember."

He broke off with a vague gesture, and sat looking at the others vacantly with his lean face furrowed.

"We must have been with them two years—but I don't quite know. It was all the same up yonder—ever so far to the north."

It seemed to Wyllard that he had seldom heard anything more expressive in its way than this sailorman's brief and fragmentary description of his life in the wilderness. He had heard from whaler-skippers a little about the tundra that fringes the Polar Sea, the vast desolation frozen hard in summer a few inches below the surface, on which nothing beyond the mosses ever grew. It was easy to understand the brain-crushing sameness and monotony of an existence checkered only by times of dire scarcity on those lonely shores.

"How did you live?" he asked.

"There were the birds in summer, and fish in the rivers. In winter we killed things in the lanes in the ice, though there were weeks when we lay about the blubber lamp in the pits. They made pits and put a roof on them. I don't know why we staked there, but Jake had always a notion that we might get across to Alaska—somehow. We were way out on the ice one day when Jim fell into a crevice, and we couldn't get him out."

He stopped, and sat still a while as one dreaming. "I can't put things together, but at last we came south, Jake and I, and struck the Kamtchadales again. We could talk to them, and one of them told us about a schooner lying in an inlet by a settlement. The Russians had brought her there from the islands, and she must have been a sealer. Jake figured it was just possible we might run away with her and push across for the Aleutians or Alaska."

Charly looked up suddenly. "She—was—a sealer—Hayson's *Seminole.* I was in Victoria when we heard that the Russians had seized her."

Wyllard turned to Overweg, who nodded when he asked a question in French.

"Yes," he said, "I believe the vessel lies in the inlet still. They have used her now and then. It is understood that they were warranted in seizing her, but I think there was some diplomatic pressure brought to bear on them, for they sent her crew home."

Lewson went on again. "Food was scarce that season, and we got 'most nothing in the traps," he said. "Besides, there were Russians out prospecting, and that headed us off. We figured that some of the Kamtchadales who traded skins to the settlements would put them on our trail. When we went to look for the boat she'd gone, but we hadn't much notion of getting off in her, though another time—I don't remember when—we gave two Kamtchadales messages we'd cut on slips of wood. Sometimes the schooners stood in along the coast."

Wyllard nodded. "Dunton of the *Cypress* got your message," he said. "He was in difficulties then, but he afterwards sent it me."

"Well," said Lewson, "there isn't much more to it. We hung about the beach a while, and then went north before the winter. Jake played out on the trail. By and by he had to let up, and in a day or two I buried him."

His voice grew hoarse. "After that it didn't seem to matter what became of me, but I kept the trail somehow, and found I couldn't stay up yonder. That's why I started south with some of them before the summer came.

Now I'm here—talking English—talking with white men—but it doesn't seem the same as it should have been—without the others."

He talked no more that night, but Wyllard translated part of his story for the benefit of Overweg.

"The thing, it seems incredible," commented the scientist. "This man, who has so little to tell, knows things which would make a trained explorer famous."

"It generally happens that way," said Wyllard. "The men who know can't tell."

Overweg made a sign of assent, and then changed the subject.

"What shall you do now?" he asked.

"Start for the inlet, where we expect to find the schooner, at sunrise. I want to say"—Wyllard hesitated—"that you have laid an obligation on me which I can never repay; but I can, at least, replace the provisions you have given me."

"That goes for nothing," declared Overweg, with a smile. "I have, however, drawn upon my base camp rather heavily, and should be glad of any stores from the schooner that you could let me have. The difficulty is that I do not wish to go too far toward the beach."

They arranged a rendezvous a few days' march from the inlet, and in another half-hour all of them were fast asleep.

When the first of the daylight came Wyllard set off with his two companions, and since it was evident that Dampier must have now lain in the inlet awaiting them a considerable time, they marched fast for several days. Then, to their consternation, they came upon the Siwash lying beside a river badly lame. It appeared that in climbing a slippery ridge of rock the knee he had injured had given way, and he had fallen some distance heavily, after which the Kamtchadale, finding him helpless, had disappeared with most of the provisions. None of the party ever learned what had become of the faithless courier, but they realized that the situation was now a rather serious one. Charly, who looked at Wyllard when he had heard the Indian's story, explained it concisely.

"I'm worrying about the boat we left on the edge of the ice," he said. "I've had a notion all along it was going to make trouble. Dampier would see the wreckage when he ran in, and I guess it would only mean one thing to him. He'd make quite certain he was right when he didn't find us at the inlet." He paused and pointed towards the distant sea. "You have got to push right on with Lewson as fast as you can while I try to bring the Siwash along."

Wyllard started within the next few minutes, and afterward never quite forgot the strain and stress of that arduous march. The journey that he had made with Overweg had been difficult enough, but they had then traversed rising ground from which most of the melting snow had drained away. Now, however, as they approached the more level littoral there were wide tracts of mire and swamp to be painfully floundered through, while every ravine and hollow was swept by a frothing torrent, and they had often to search for hours for a place where it was possible to cross. To make things worse, they were drenched with rain half the time, and trails of dingy mist obscured their path, but they toiled on stubbornly through every obstacles, though it was only by the tensest effort that Wyllard kept pace with his companion. The gaunt, long-haired Lewson seemed proof against physical weariness, and there was seldom any change in the expression of his grim, lined face. Now and then Wyllard felt a curious shrinking as he glanced at Lewson, for his fixed look suggested what he had borne in the awful solitudes of the frozen North.

Slowly, with infinite toil, they crossed the weary leagues, lying at night with a single skin between them and the soil, for they traveled light. Wyllard was limping painfully, with his boots worn off his feet, when one morning they came into sight of a low promontory which rose against a stretch of gray lifeless sea. His heart throbbed fast as he realized that behind it lay the inlet into which Dampier had arranged to bring the *Selache*. He glanced at Lewson, who said nothing, and they plodded forward faster than before.

The misty sun was high in the heavens when they reached the foot of the steep rise, and Wyllard gasped heavily as they crept up the ascent. He was making a severe muscular effort; but it was the nervous tension that troubled him most, for he knew that he would look down upon the inlet from the summit. He blamed himself bitterly for not sending a messenger to Dampier immediately after he fell in with Overweg. There had certainly been difficulties in the way, for the increase in the scientist's party had made additional packers necessary, and Wyllard felt that he could not reasonably compel the man who had succored him to leave behind the camp comforts to which he had evidently been accustomed. In spite of that, he had been at fault in not disregarding every objection, and he realized it now.

Somehow he kept pace with Lewson, but he closed one hand tight as he neared the top of the promontory. When he reached the summit he stopped suddenly, and his face set hard as he looked down. Beneath him lay a strip of dim, green water, with a fringe of soft white surf, while beyond the beach there stretched away an empty expanse of slowly heaving sea. There was no schooner in the inlet, no boat upon the beach.

In another moment or two they went down the slope at a stumbling run, and then stopped, gasping by the water's edge, and looked at one another. There were marks in the sand which showed where a boat had been drawn up not very long before. The *Selache* evidently had been there, and had sailed away again.

Wyllard sat down limply upon the shingle, for all the strength seemed suddenly to melt out of him, and it was several minutes before he looked up. Gazing out at sea, Lewson was still standing, a shapeless, barbaric figure in his garments of skins. The hide moccasins he wore had chafed through, and Wyllard noticed that the blood was trickling from one of his feet.

"Well?" Lewson asked harshly.

Wyllard laid a stern restraint upon himself. Their case looked desperate, but it must be grappled with.

"We must go back and meet the rest," he said. "That first—what is to come afterwards I don't quite know." A faint gleam of resolution crept into his eyes. "The schooner the Russians seized lies in an inlet down the coast."

Lewson made a sign of comprehension. "There are four of us. There will be birds by and by. I can trap things."

He flung himself down near his comrade, and for an hour neither of them spoke. Wyllard was worn out physically and limp from the last few hours' mental strain, while Lewson very seldom said more than was absolutely necessary. They made a very frugal meal, and long afterwards Wyllard was haunted by the memory of that dreary afternoon during which he lay upon the shingle watching the slow pulsations of the dim, lifeless sea.

They set out again early next morning, and, as it happened, found a little depôt of provisions that Dampier had made, but it was several days before they met Charly and the Indian, and another week had passed before Overweg reached the appointed meeting-place. The scientist listened to Wyllard's story gravely, and then appeared to consider.

"You have some plans?" he asked.

Wyllard admitted that this was the case, and Overweg smiled behind his spectacles.

"It is, perhaps, better that you should not tell me what they are," he said. "There is, however, one thing I can do. You say you left some stores you could not carry at the depôt, which I will take, for provisions are now not plentiful with me, but at my base camp there are still a few things you have not which are almost necessary, and"—he made a gesture of reassuring significance—"after all, if I have to go south a little earlier than I intended it is not a great matter."

He wrote on a strip of paper which he handed to Wyllard. "You will take these, and nothing else. I may add that Smirnoff is stationed at the inlet where the schooner lies."

Wyllard thanked him, and then looked him in the eyes. "There is a long journey before us, and you have only my word that I will take nothing but these things."

Overweg nodded quietly. "Yes," he said, "it is perhaps permissible to assure you that it is sufficient for me."

Little more was said, and in another half-hour Wyllard and his companions were ready to set out. He and the little spectacled scientist grasped each other's hands, and then Wyllard abruptly turned away. Looking back a few minutes later, he saw Overweg standing upon the ridge where he had left him, silhouetted against a low, gray sky. The scientist raised his cap once, and Wyllard, who answered him, swung around once more, and strode faster towards the south.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LAST EFFORT

It was after a long and arduous journey which had left its mark on all of them that Wyllard and his companions, one lowering evening, lay among the boulders beside a sheltered inlet waiting for the dusk to fall. They were cramped and aching, for they had scarcely moved during the last hour. Their garments were badly tattered, and their half-covered feet were bleeding. With three knives and one rifle among them they were a pitiful company to seize a vessel, but there was resolution in their haggard faces.

Close in front of them the green water lapped softly among the stones. The breeze was light off shore, and the tide, which was just running ebb, rippled against the bows of a little schooner lying some thirty yards from the bank. The vessel had been seized for illegal sealing some years earlier, and it was evident that she had been little used since then. The paint was peeling from her cracked and weathered side, her gear was frayed and bleached with frost and rain, and only very hardpressed men would have faced the thought of going to sea in her. Wyllard and his companions were, however, very hardpressed indeed, and they preferred the hazards of a voyage in the crazy vessel to falling into the Russians' hands. It was also clear that they had no choice. It must be either one thing or the other.

Some little distance up stream a low hill cut against the dingy sky. It shut off all of the upper part of the inlet which wound in behind it, but Wyllard and his companions had cautiously climbed the slope earlier in the afternoon, and, lying flat upon the summit, had looked down upon the little wooden houses that clustered above the beach. He had then decided that this part of the inlet would dry out at about half-ebb, and as the schooner's boat, which he meant to seize lay upon the shingle, it was evident that he must carry out his plans within the next three hours.

These plans were very simple. There was nobody on board the schooner, which lay in deeper water, and he believed that it would be possible to swim off to her and slip the cable; but they must have provisions, and there was, so far as he could see, only one way of obtaining them. A building which stood by itself close beside the beach was evidently a store, for he had seen two men carrying bags and cases out of it under the superintendence of a third in some kind of uniform, and it appeared to be unguarded. Wyllard had reasons for surmising that the store contained Government supplies, and had arranged that Charly and Lewson should break into it as soon as darkness fell. They were to pull off to the schooner with anything they could find inside. Whether they would succeed in doing this he did not know, and he admitted to himself that it scarcely seemed probable, but he could think of no other plan, and the attempt must be made.

A thin haze drove across the crest of the hill, the breeze freshened slightly, and the little ripples lapped more noisily along the shingle. There was evidently a great deal of fresh water coming down the inlet, and it was in a fever of impatience he watched the schooner strain at her cable. That evening had already seemed the longest he had ever spent in his life. By and by it began to rain, and little streams of chilly water trickled about the weary men, but they lay still, with lips tight set in tense suspense. What Lewson had had to face in the awful icy wastes to the north of them Wyllard could scarcely imagine, and Lewson could not tell, but he and his two other comrades had borne things almost beyond endurance since he began his search, and now there was far too much at stake for him to increase the odds against them by any undue precipitancy. He was then in a dangerous mood, but he had laid his plans with grim, cold-blooded caution, and he meant to adhere to them.

Very slowly the light faded, until the beach grew shadowy, and the schooner's spars and rigging showed dim and blurred against a dusky background. The rise that shut off the settlement was lost in drifting haze, and the dull rumble of the surf on the outer beach came up more sharply through the gathering darkness. The measured beat of the tide's deep pulsations almost maddened Wyllard as he lay and listened, for if all went right, in an hour or two he would be sliding out over the long heave with every sail piled on to the crazy schooner.

When there was only a faint gleam of water sliding by below, he rose stiffly to his feet, and Lewson stretched out a hand for the rifle that lay among the stones. There was a sharp click as he jerked the lever, and then he laughed, a little jarring laugh, as the magazine snapped back.

"They'll treat us as pirates if they get hands on us—and I've been lashed in the face—with a sled-dog-whip," he said.

Charly made no remark as he loosed the long seaman's knife in his belt. Wyllard could not utter a remonstrance, for there is, as he recognized, a point beyond which prudence does not count. After what Overweg had once or twice told him, it was unthinkable that they should fall into Smirnoff's hands.

Lewson and Charly melted away into the darkness. Wyllard and the Siwash walked quietly down to the water's edge, a little up-stream of the schooner, as the stream was running strong. As they waited a few moments before plunging into the sea they stripped off nothing, for it was evident that none of the rags they left behind could be replaced, and they knew from experience that when the first shock is over a man swimming in icy water is kept a little warmer by his clothing. For all that, the cold struck through Wyllard when he flung himself forward and swung his left hand out. It was perhaps a minute before he was clearly conscious of anything beyond the physical agony and the mental effort to retain control of his faculties. Then he made out the schooner, a vague, blurred shape a little down-stream, and he swam furiously, his face dipping under each time his left hand came out.

He drew level with the vessel, clutched at her cable, a foot short, and was driven against her bows. The stream swept him onward, gasping, and clawing savagely at the slippery side of the schooner, until his fingers found a hold. It was merely the rounded top of a bolt that he touched, but with a desperate effort he clutched the bent iron that led up from it to one of the dead-eyes of the mainmast-shrouds. He could not, however, draw himself up any further, and he hung on, wondering when his strength would fail him. The Siwash, who had crawled up the cable, leaned down from above and seized his shoulder. In another moment he reached the rail, and went staggering across the deck, dripping and half-dazed.

Action was imperatively necessary, and he braced himself for the effort. The schooner was lying with her anchor up-stream, but he did not think it would be possible to heave her over it and break it out unless he waited until the others arrived, and it would then be a lengthy and, what was more to the purpose, a noisy operation. The anchor must be sacrificed, but there was the difficulty that in the dark he could hardly expect to find a shackle on the cable. Running forward with the Siwash, he pulled out a chain stopper, and then shipping the windlass levers found with vast relief that it would work. It would make a horribly distinct clanking, he knew, but that could not be helped, and the next thing was to discover whether the end of the chain was made fast below, for it is very seldom that a skipper finds it necessary to pay out all his cable.

Dropping into the darkness of the locker beneath the forecastle, he was more fortunate than he could reasonably have expected to be, for as he crawled over the rusty links he felt a shackle. It appeared to be of the usual harp-pattern with a cottered pin, and he called out sharply to the Siwash, who presently flung him an iron bar and a big spike. He struck one of the two or three sulphur matches he had carefully treasured, and when the sputtering blue flame went out set to work to back the pin out in the dark. He smashed his knuckles and badly bruised his hands, but he succeeded, and knew that he had shortened the chain by two-thirds now.

He scrambled up on deck again and hurried aft for the vessel's kedge had been laid out astern to prevent her swinging. There was a heavy hemp warp attached to it, and it cost them some time to heave most of it over, after which they proceeded to get the mainsail on to her. It was covered with a coat, and Wyllard cut himself as he slashed through the tiers in savage impatience. Then he and the Siwash toiled at the halliards desperately, for the task of raising the heavy gaff was almost beyond their powers.

There was no grease on the mast-hoops; the blocks evidently had not been used for months. Several times they desisted a moment or two, gasping, breathless, and utterly exhausted. Still, foot by foot they got the black canvas up, and then, leaving the peak hanging, ran forward to the boom-foresail, which was smaller and lighter. They set that, cast two jibs and the staysail loose, and let them lie. Wyllard sat down feeling that the thing they had done would, if attempted in cold blood, have appeared almost impossible. It was done, however, and now he must wait until the boat appeared. There was no sign of her, and as he gazed up the inlet, seeing only the glimmer of the water and the sliding mist, the suspense became almost intolerable. Minute after minute slipped by, and still nothing loomed out of the haze. The canvas rustled and banged above him, there was a growing splashing beneath the bows, and the schooner strained more heavily at her cable. Everything was ready, only his comrades did not appear. He clenched his hands and set his lips as he waited. He wondered at the Siwash, who sat upon the rail, a dim, shapeless figure, impassively still.

At last his heart leaped, for a faint splash of oars came out of the darkness. Both men ran forward to the windlass. The sharp clanking it made drowned the splash of oars, but in another minute or two there was a crash as the boat drove alongside, and Charly scrambled up with a rope while Lewson hurled sundry bags and cases after him. Then he climbed on deck in turn, and Charly began a breathless explanation.

"It's all we could get. There's nobody on our trail," he said.

The last fact was most important, and Wyllard cut him short. "Get the jibs and staysail on to her," he commanded.

The new arrivals worked rapidly while the cable clanked and rattled as the schooner drove astern, but at the first heave the rotten staysail tore off the hanks, and one jib burst as they ran it up its stay. For an anxious moment or two the cable jammed, and the anchor brought the schooner up. All four flung themselves upon the windlass levers, and after a furious effort the chain came up again and ran out faster, fathom by fathom, rattling horribly, until the end of it shot suddenly over the windlass. Then there was another check as the schooner brought up by the kedge swung suddenly across the stream.

Her banging canvas filled, she listed over, and it was evident to all of them that if the kedge started she would forthwith drive ashore. Tense with strain, its warp ripped out of the water, and she was swinging on it heading for the beach when Wyllard flung himself upon the wheel.

"Hang on to every inch or break it!" he roared. "Out main-boom; box your jib and staysail up to weather!"

In desperate haste they obeyed orders, amid a great clatter of blocks and thrashing of canvas, while Wyllard wrenched up his helm, and the schooner, straining on the warp, fell away with her bows down-stream. The sweat of effort dripped from Wyllard when he swung up an arm to Lewson, who was standing at the bollard to which the warp was made fast.

"Now!" he cried hoarsely, "let her go!"

The rope fell with a splash, the schooner lurched forward and drove away down the inlet with the stream running seaward under her, while Wyllard felt a trifle dazed from sheer revulsion of feeling. The rumble of the surf was growing louder; the deck slanted slightly beneath him. If they could keep her off the beach for the next few minutes there was freedom before them! He hazarded a glance astern, but could see no sign of a boat up the inlet. They had done a thing which even then appeared almost incredible.

The breeze came down fresher, the gurgle at the bows grew louder, and the deck began to heave with a slow and regular rise and fall. A long, shadowy point girt about with spectral surf slipped by, and they were out in open water. They ran the schooner out for an hour or two and then, though the peak of the mainsail burst to tatters as they hauled her on a wind, let her stretch away northward following the trend of coast.

"We'll stand on as she's lying until we find a creek or river mouth. We must have water," Wyllard said.

An hour later he called Charly to the wheel, and sitting down in the shelter of the rail, went to sleep, though this was about the last thing he had contemplated doing. It was gray dawn when he opened his eyes again, and aching all over and very cold, stood up to see that the schooner was tumbling over a spiteful sea with the hazy loom of land not far away from her. He glanced at the gear and canvas, and was almost appalled, while Charly, who was busy close by, saw his face and grinned.

"You don't want to look at her too much," he observed. "We took a swig on the peak-halliards a little while ago, and had to let up before we pulled the gaff off her. Boom-foresail's worse, and the jibs are dropping off her, while the water just pours in through her top-sides when she puts another lee plank down."

Wyllard made an expressive gesture, and leaned upon the rail. He realized then something of the nature of the task he had undertaken. They had no anchor, no fresh water, no fuel for cooking, and, so far as he was aware, very few provisions, while it seemed to him that the weathered, worn-out gear would not hold the masts in the vessel in any weight of breeze. Still, the thing must be attempted, and there was one want, at least, that could be supplied.

"Anyway," he said, "we'll beat her in. When we come abreast of the first creek you and Tom and the Siwash will go ashore."

It was afternoon when they sighted a little stream, and they took most of the canvas off the vessel before three of them pulled away in the boat, leaving Wyllard at the helm. It was blowing moderately fresh off shore, and it was with feverish impatience that he watched them toiling at the oars, two of them pulling while the third man sculled. They disappeared behind a point, and an anxious hour went by before the boat, which now showed a very scanty strip of side above the tumbling foam, crept out from the beach again. Having no breakers, they had brought the water off in bulk, sitting in it as they pulled, and it was fortunate that the boat lurched off shore easily before the little splashing seas. They lost some of the water before they hove it into the big rusty tank, and then they held a consultation when they had swung the boat in and the schooner was running off to the east again.

"We've about stores enough to last two weeks—that is, if you don't expect too much," Lewson pointed out. "There's an American stove in the deck-house, and while we can't find anything meant to burn in it there's an ax down forward, and we could cut out cabin floorings, or a beam or two, without taking too much stiffening out of her."

Wyllard, who had inspected the stores, knew that a fortnight was the very longest that could be counted on, though they ate no more than would keep a modicum of strength in them. From their kind and quality he surmised that the provisions had been intended for the officials in charge of the settlement.

"How did you get them, Tom?" he asked.

"The thing," said Lewson quietly, "was simple. It was dark and hazy, and raining quite hard. The first thing we did was to run the boat down and leave her nearly afloat. Then we crawled back, and lay by listening outside that store. We were figuring how we were to break it in when two men came along. They went in and came out with a bag or two, and as they left the door open we figured they were coming back for more. We humped out a moderate load, and had just got it down to the boat when we saw those men, or two others, in the haze. I was for lying by, but Charly would get out then."

Charly laughed dryly. "He wanted to take the rifle and go back to look for Smirnoff. I'd no use for any trouble of that kind, and I shoved the boat off while he was seeing how many ca'tridges there were in the magazine. He waded in and grabbed the boat when he saw I was sure going, but I shoved her away from him. Then it kind of struck him he had to get in or swim."

Lewson's expression grew grim. "That's the thing that hurts the most—to go away before I got even with that man," he declared. "Still, I may get over it if I try to think of him with his nose smashed hard to starboard."

Wyllard made a sign of impatience. He felt that, after all, there was perhaps something to be said for Smirnoff's point of view.

"There is just one plan open to us, and that's to drive the schooner across to the eastward as fast as we can," he said. "We might, perhaps, pick up an Alaska C. C. factory before the provisions quite run out if this breeze and the gear hold up. Failing that, we must try for one of the Western Aleutians."

The others concurred in this, and very fortunately the breeze kept to the west and south, for Wyllard had very grave doubts as to whether he could have thrashed the schooner to windward through a steep head sea. Indeed, on looking back on that voyage and remembering the state of the vessel, it seemed to him that he and his companions had escaped as by a miracle. In any case, they hove the vessel to, one misty evening, in a deep inlet behind a promontory, and Wyllard, who sculled up the inlet alone in the growing darkness, badly startled the agent of an A.C.C.

factory when he appeared, ragged, haggard, and wet with rain, in the doorway of a big, stove-warmed room.

The agent, however, was out for business, but when Wyllard produced a wad of paper money stained by wet and perspiration he appeared quite willing to part with certain provisions. He was told that no questions would be answered, and when he had given his visitor supper, Wyllard sculled away in the darkness leaving him none the wiser. Half an hour later the schooner slipped out to sea again.

The rest was by comparison easy. They had the coast of Alaska and British Columbia close aboard, and they crept southwards in fine weather, once running off their course when the smoke of a steamer crept up above the horizon. In a strong breeze, they ran for the northern tongue of Vancouver Island, and Wyllard, who had already decided that the vessel would fetch scarcely five hundred dollars, and that it would be better if all trace of her disappeared, pulled his wheel over suddenly as she was scraping by a surf-swept reef.

In another minute she was on hard and fast, and they had scarcely got the boat over when the masts went with a crash. A quarter of an hour later the wreckage was thrown up on the beach, and, before they set out on a long march through the bush, there was very little to be seen of the vessel.

Three or four days afterward they reached a little wooden town, and Wyllard, who slipped into it alone in the dusk, bought clothing for himself and his companions, who put it on in the bush. Then they went into the town together, and slept that night in a hotel.

Their troubles were over, and, what was more, Wyllard, who pledged the rest to secrecy, fancied that what had become of the schooner would remain a mystery.

CHAPTER XXXI

WYLLARD COMES HOME

HARVEST had commenced at the Range, and the clashing binders were moving through the grain when Hawtrey sat one afternoon in Wyllard's room. It was about five o'clock, and every man belonging to the homestead was toiling, bare-armed and grimed with dust, among the yellow oats, but Hawtrey sat at a table gazing with a troubled face at the litter of papers in front of him. He wore a white shirt and store clothes, which was distinctly unusual in case of a Western farmer at harvest time, and Edmonds, the mortgage-jobber, leaned back in a big chair quietly watching him.

Edmonds had called at a singularly inconvenient time, and Hawtrey was anxious to get rid of him before the arrival of the guests that he expected. It was Sally's birthday, and, since she took pleasure in simple festivities of any kind, he had arranged to celebrate it at the Range. He was, however, sufficiently acquainted with the moneylender's character to realize that it was most unlikely that he would take his departure before he had accomplished the purpose which had brought him there. This was to collect several thousand dollars.

It was quite clear to Hawtrey that he was in an unpleasantly tight place. Edmonds held a bond upon his homestead, teams and implements as security for a short date loan, repayment of which was due, and he was to be married to Sally in a month or so.

"Can't you wait a little?" he asked at length.

"I'm afraid not," was the uncompromising reply. "Money's tight this fall, and things have gone against me. Besides, you could pay me off if you wanted to."

Edmonds turned toward an open window, and glanced at the great stretch of yellow grain that ran back across the prairie. Dusty teams and binders with flashing wooden arms moved half-hidden along the edge of the vast field, and the still, clear air was filled with a clash and clatter and the rustle of flung-out sheaves.

There was no doubt that money could be raised upon that harvest field. Indeed, Hawtrey fancied that his companion would be quite content to take a bond for the delivery of so many thousand bushels in repayment of the loan, but while he had already gone further than he had at one time contemplated doing, this was a course he shrank from suggesting. After all, the grain was Wyllard's, and there was the difficulty that Wyllard might still come back. If Wyllard failed to return, an absence of another few months would entitle his executors to consider him dead. In either case, Hawtrey would be required to account for his property.

"No," he decided, "I can't take—that way."

There was a trace of contempt in the mortgage-jobber's smile. "You of course understand just how you're fixed, but it seemed to me from that draft of the arrangement with Wyllard that you have the power to do pretty much what you like. Anyway, if you gave me a bond on as much of that grain as would wipe out the loan at the present figure, it would only mean that you would have Wyllard's trustees for creditors instead of me, and it's probable that they wouldn't be as hard upon you as I'm compelled to be. As things stand, you have got to square up or I throw your place on the market."

Hawtrey's face betrayed his dismay; and Edmonds believed that he would yield to a little further pressure. Gregory had not said anything about the mortgage to Sally, and it would be extremely unpleasant to be turned out upon the prairie within a month or two of his marriage, for he could not count upon being left in possession of the Range much longer.

"I'm only entitled to handle Wyllard's money on his account," he objected.

Edmonds appeared to reflect. "So far as I can remember there was nothing of that kind stated in the draft of the arrangement. It empowered you to do anything you thought fit with the money, but it's altogether your own affair. I can, of course, get my money back by selling your homestead, and I must decide if that must be done or not before I leave."

Edmonds had very little doubt as to what the decision would be. Hawtrey would yield, and afterwards it would not be difficult to draw him into some unwise speculation with the object of getting the money back, which he imagined that Hawtrey would be desperately anxious to do. As the result of this, he expected to get such a hold upon the Range that he would be master of the situation when the property fell into the hands of Wyllard's trustees. That Hawtrey would be disgraced as well as ruined naturally did not count with him.

Gregory took up one of the papers, and read it through. Then he rose, and stood leaning on the table while he gazed at the teams toiling amid the grain. There was wealth enough yonder to release him from his torturing anxieties, and after all, he felt, something must turn up before the reckoning was due. It was not in his nature to face a crisis, and with him a trouble seemed less formidable if it could only be put off a little. Edmonds, who knew with what kind of man he had to deal, said nothing further, and quietly reached out for another cigar. He saw vacillation in his victim's manner.

Meantime, though neither of the men were aware of it, Sally had alighted from her wagon on the other side of the house, and two other vehicles were growing larger upon the sweep of whitened prairie. As she entered the homestead the girl met Mrs. Nansen, who informed her that Hawtrey was busy with Edmonds in Wyllard's room. Sally's eyes sparkled when she heard it, and her face grew hard.

"That man!" she exclaimed. "Well, I guess I'll go right in to them."

In another minute she opened the door, and answered the mortgage-jobber's embarrassed greeting with a frigid stare. Having had some experience with Sally's uncompromising directness, he was inclined to fancy that the game was up, but he waited calmly.

"What's this man doing here again?" Sally asked, fixing her eyes on Hawtrey. "You promised me you would never make another deal with him."

Gregory flushed. Had he thought it would be the least use he would have made some attempt to get Sally out of the room, but he was unpleasantly sure that unless she was fully satisfied first it would only result in failure. Driven to desperation, as he was, he had a half-conscious feeling that she might provide him with some means of escape. Sally had certainly saved him once, and, humiliating as the thought was, he had an idea that she did not expect too much from him. She might be very angry, but Sally's anger was, after all, less difficult to face than Agatha's quiet scorn.

"I haven't made another deal. It's—a previous one," Gregory explained lamely.

Sally swung around on Edmonds. "You have come here for money? You may as well tell me. I won't leave you with Gregory until you do."

It was quite evident that she would make her promise good, and Edmonds nodded.

"Yes," he said, "about three thousand dollars."

"And Gregory can't pay you?"

Edmonds thought rapidly, and decided to take a bold course. He was acquainted with Hawtrey's habit of putting things off, and fancied that his debtor would seize upon the first loophole of escape from an embarrassing situation. That was why he gave him a lead.

"Well," he said, "there is a way in which he could do it if he wished. He has only to fill in a paper and hand it to me."

Edmonds had not sufficiently counted on Sally's knowledge of his victim's affairs, or her quickness of wit, for she turned to Hawtrey with a commanding gesture.

"Where are you going to get three thousand dollars from?" she asked.

The blood rushed into Hawtrey's face, for this was a thing he could not tell her; but a swift suspicion flashed into her mind as she looked at him.

"Perhaps it could be—raised," he answered.

"To pay this mortgage off?" Sally swung round on Edmonds now, as she questioned him.

"Yes," he admitted, "he can easily do it."

Then the girl turned to Hawtrey. "Gregory," she said with harsh incisiveness, "there's only one way you could get that money—and it isn't yours."

Hawtrey made no reply. He could not meet her gaze, and when he turned from her she looked back as the mortgage-broker.

"If you're gone before I come back there'll sure be trouble," she informed him, and sped swiftly out of the room.

Hawtrey sat down limply in his chair, and Edmonds laughed in a jarring manner. The game was up, but, after all, if he got his three thousand dollars he could be satisfied, for one way or another he had already extracted a great deal of money from Hawtrey.

"If I were you I'd marry that girl right away," Edmonds advised Hawtrey. "You'd be safer if you had her to look after you."

Hawtrey let the jibe pass. For one thing, he felt that it was warranted, and just then his anxiety was too strong for anger.

In the meanwhile, Sally had run out of the house to meet Hastings, who had just handed his wife down from their wagon. The girl drew him a pace or two aside.

"I'm worried about Gregory," she said; "he's in trouble—big trouble. Somehow we have got to raise three thousand dollars. Edmonds is inside with him."

Hastings did not seem surprised. "Ah!" he said, "I guess it's over that mortgage of his. It would be awkward for you and Gregory if Edmonds took the homestead and turned him out."

Sally's face grew white, but she met his gaze steadily.

"Oh," she replied, "that's not what I would mind the most."

Hastings reflected a moment or two. He thought that it was a very difficult admission for the girl to make, and that she had made it suggested that Hawtrey might become involved in more serious difficulties. He had also a strong suspicion of what they were likely to be.

"Sally," questioned Hastings quietly, "you are afraid of Edmonds making him do something you would not like?"

Though he did not answer directly, he saw the shame in the girl's face, and remembered that he was one of Wyllard's trustees.

"I must raise that money—now—and I don't know where to get more than five hundred dollars from. I might manage that," she said.

"Well," answered Hastings, "you want me to lead you then, and I'm not sure that I can. Still, if you'll wait a few minutes I'll see what I can do."

Sally left him, and he turned to his wife, whose expression suggested that she had overheard part of what was said and had guessed the rest.

"You mean to raise that money? After all, we are friends of his, and it may save him from letting Edmonds get his grip upon the Range," she said.

Hastings made a sign of reluctant assent. "I don't quite know how I can do it personally, in view of the figure wheat is standing at, and I don't think much of any security that Gregory could offer me. Still, there is, perhaps, a way in which it could be arranged, and it's one that, considering everything, is more or less admissible. I think I'll wait here for Agatha."

Agatha was in the wagon driven by Sproatly. When Sproatly had helped her and Winifred to alight, Hastings, who walked to the house with them, drew Agatha into an unoccupied room.

"I'm afraid that Gregory's in rather serious trouble. Sally seems very anxious about him," he said. "It's rather a delicate subject, but I understand that in a general way you are on good terms with both of them?"

Agatha met his embarrassed gaze with a smile. She knew that what he really wished to discover was whether she still felt any bitterness against Gregory or blamed him for pledging himself to Sally.

"Yes," she answered, "Sally and I are good friends, and I am very sorry to hear that Gregory is in any difficulty."

Hastings still seemed embarrassed, and she was becoming puzzled by his manner.

"Once upon a time you would have done anything possible to make things easier for him," he said. "I wonder if I might ask if to some extent you have that feeling still?"

"Of course. If he is in serious trouble I should be glad to do anything within my power to help him."

"Even if it cost, we will say, about six hundred English pounds?"

Agatha gazed at him in bewilderment.

"There are some twenty dollars in my possession which your wife handed me not long ago," she remarked in a puzzled tone.

"Still, if you had the money, you would be glad to help him—and would not regret it afterwards?"

"No," asserted Agatha decisively; "if I had the means, and the need was urgent, I should be glad to do what I could." Then she laughed. "I can't understand in the least how this is to the purpose."

"If you will wait for the next two or three months I may be able to explain it to you," replied Hastings. "In the meanwhile, there are one or two things I have to do."

When he left her, Agatha sat still, wondering what he could have meant, but feeling that she would be willing to do what she could for Gregory. Hastings' suggestion that it was possible that she still cherished any sense of grievance against him because he was going to marry Sally, brought a scornful smile to her lips. It was easy to forgive Gregory that, for she now saw him as he was—shallow, careless, shiftless, a man without depth of character. He had a few surface graces, and on occasion a certain half-insolent forcefulness of manner which in a curious fashion was almost becoming. There was, however, nothing beneath the surface. He was, it seemed, quite willing that a woman should help him out of the trouble in which he had involved himself, for she had no doubt that Sally had sent Hastings on his incomprehensible errand.

Then a clear voice came in through the window, and turning towards it Agatha discovered that a young lad clad in blue duck was singing as he drove his binder through the grain. The song was a simple one which had some vogue just then upon the prairie, but her eyes grew suddenly hazy as odd snatches of it reached her through the beat of hoofs, the clash of the binder's arms and the rustle of the flung-out sheaves.

"My Bonny lies over the ocean,
My Bonny lies over the sea."

The youth called to his horses, and it was a few moments before she heard again—

"Bring back my Bonny to me."

A quiver ran through her as she leaned upon the window frame. There was a certain pathos in the simple strain, and she could fancy that the lad, who was clearly English, as an exile felt it, too. Once more as the jaded horses and clashing machine grew smaller down the edge of the great sweep of yellow grain, his voice came faintly up to her with its haunting thrill of longing and regret—

"Bring back my Bonny to me."

This in her case was more than anyone could do, and as she stood listening a tear splashed upon her closed hands. The man, by comparison with whom Gregory appeared a mere lay figure, was in all probability lying still far up in the solitudes of the frozen North, with his last grim journey done. This time, however, he had not carried her picture with him. Gregory was to blame for that, and it was the one thing she could not forgive him.

She leaned against the window for another minute, struggling with an almost uncontrollable longing, and looking out upon the sweep of golden wheat and whitened grass with brimming eyes, until there was a rattle of wheels, and she saw Edmonds drive away. She heard voices in the corridor, and it became evident that Hastings was speaking to his wife.

"I've got rid of the man, and it's reasonable to expect that Gregory will keep clear of him after this," he said.

"Don't you mean that Agatha did it?"

It was Mrs. Hastings who asked the question, and Agatha became intent as she heard her name. She did not, however, hear the answer, and Mrs. Hastings spoke again.

"Allen," she said, "you don't keep a secret badly, though Harry pledged you not to tell. Still, all that caution was a little unnecessary. It was, of course, just the kind of thing he would do."

"What did he do?" Hastings asked, and Agatha heard Mrs. Hastings' soft laugh, for they were just outside the door now.

"Left the Range, or most of it, to Agatha in case he didn't come back again."

They went on, and Agatha, turning from the window, sat down limply with the blood in her face and her heart beating fast. Wyllard's last care, it seemed, had been to provide for her, and that fact brought her a curious sense of solace. In an unexplainable fashion it took the bitterest sting out of her grief, though how far he had succeeded in his intentions did not seem to matter in the least. It was sufficient to know that amid all the haste of his preparation he had not forgotten her.

Becoming a little calmer, she understood what had been in Hastings' mind during the interview that had puzzled her, and was glad that she assured him of her willingness to sacrifice anything that might be hers if it was needed to set Gregory free. It was, she felt, what Wyllard would have done with the money. He had said that Gregory was a friend of his, and that, she knew, meant a great deal to him.

She suddenly realized that she must join the others if she did not wish her absence to excite comment. Going out, she came face to face with Sally in the corridor. The girl stopped, and saw the sympathy in her eyes.

"Yes," she said impulsively, "I've saved him. Edmonds has gone. Hastings bought him off, and, though I don't quite know how, you helped him. He stayed behind to wait for you."

Agatha smiled. The vibrant relief in her companion's voice stirred her, and she realized once more that in choosing this half-taught girl Gregory had acted with a wholly unusual wisdom. It was with a sense of half-contemptuous amusement at her own folly that she remembered how she had once fancied that Gregory was marrying beneath him. Sally was far from perfect, but in the essentials the man was not fit to brush her shoes.

"My dear," responded Agatha, "I really don't know exactly what I—have—done, but if it amounts to anything it is a pleasure to me."

They went together into the big general room where Gregory was talking to Winifred somewhat volubly. Agatha, however, judged from his manner that he had, at least, the grace to feel ashamed of himself. Supper, she heard Mrs. Nansen say, would be ready very shortly, and feeling in no mood for general conversation, she sat near a window looking out across the harvest field until she heard a distant shout, and saw a wagon appear on the crest of the hill. To her astonishment, two of the binders stopped, and she saw the men who sprang down from them run to meet the wagon. In another moment or two more of the teams stopped, and a faint clamor of cries went up, while here and there little running figures straggled up the slope. All the occupants of the room clustered about her at the window, and Winifred turned to Hastings.

"What are they shouting for?" she asked. "They are all crowding about the wagon now."

Agatha felt suddenly dazed and dizzy, for she knew what the answer to that question must be even before Mrs. Hastings spoke.

"It's Harry coming back!" she gasped.

In another moment they all hastened out of the house, and Agatha found it scarcely possible to follow them, for the sudden revulsion of feeling had almost overpowered her. Still, she reached the door, and saw the wagon drawn up amid a cluster of struggling men. Presently Wyllard, whom they surrounded, broke from them. She stood on the threshold waiting for him, and in the moment of her exultation a pang smote her as she saw how gaunt and worn he was. He came straight toward her, apparently regardless of the others, and, clasping the hands she held out, drew her into the house.

"So you have not married Gregory yet?" he questioned, and laughed triumphantly when he saw the answer in her shining eyes.

"No," she said softly, "it is certain that I will never marry him."

Wyllard drew her back still further with a compelling grasp.

"Why?" he asked.

Agatha looked up at him, and then turned her eyes away.

"I was waiting for you," she said simply.

Then he took her in his arms and kissed her before he turned, still with her hand in his, to face the others who were now flocking back to the house. In another moment they went in together, amid a confused clamor of good wishes.

THE END